The Guerilla Tongue": The Politics of Resistance in Puerto Rican Poetry

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“THE GUERILLA TONGUE”: THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE IN PUERTO RICAN POETRY

A Dissertation Presented

by

NATASHA AZANK

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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English

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by

Natasha Azank

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DEDICATION

For my family.

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ABSTRACT

"THE GUERILLA TONGUE": THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE IN PUERTO RICAN POETRY

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This dissertation examines how the work of four Puerto Rican poets – Julia de Burgos, Clemente Soto Vélez, Martín Espada, and Naomi Ayala – demonstrates a poetics of resistance. While resistance takes a variety of forms in their poetic discourse, this project asserts that these poets have and continue to play an integral role in the cultural decolonization of Puerto Rico, which has been generally unacknowledged in both the critical scholarship on their work and the narrative of Puerto Rico's anti-colonial struggle. Chapter One discuses the theoretical concepts used in defining a poetics of resistance, including Barbara Harlow's definition of resistance literature, Edward Said's concepts of cultural decolonization, and Jahan Ramazani's theory of transnational poetics. Chapter Two provides an overview of Puerto Rico's unique political status and highlights several pivotal events in the nation's history, such as El Grito de Lares, the Ponce Massacre, and the Vieques Protest to demonstrate the continuity of the Puerto Rican people's resistance to oppression and attempted subversion of their colonial status.

Chapter Three examines Julia de Burgos' understudied poems of resistance and argues that she employs a rhetoric of resistance through the use of repetition,

personification, and war imagery in order to raise the consciousness of her fellow Puerto Ricans and to provoke her audience into action. By analyzing Clemente Soto Vélez's use of personification, anaphora, and most importantly, juxtaposition, Chapter Four demonstrates that his poetry functions as a dialectical process and contends that the innovative form he develops throughout his poetic career reinforces his radical perspective for an egalitarian society. Chapter Five illustrates how Martín Espada utilizes rich metaphor, sensory details, and musical imagery to foreground issues of social class, racism, and economic exploitation across geographic, national, and cultural borders. Chapter six traces Naomi Ayala's feminist discourse of resistance that denounces social injustice while simultaneously expressing a female identity that seeks liberation through her understanding of history, her reverence for memory, and her relationship with the earth. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that Burgos, Soto Vélez, Espada, and Ayala not only advocate for but also enact resistance and social justice through their art.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During a family visit to my grandmother's home in El Paso in 2010, my sister and I discovered a book of poetry in Spanish called *Grandes Poetisas de America: Clara Lair, Alfonsina Storni, Julia de Burgos, Gabriela Mistral*, which was printed in the Dominican Republic in 1984. On the front cover was an inscription written in Spanish from my Tía Mary to my grandmother; it reads: "To my dear Ofe, I hope that the magnificence of these four women is an inspiration for you to continue living with great hope." I was both surprised and ecstatic with this discovery; even though I knew my grandmother enjoyed reading poetry, I had no idea of her admiration for Julia de Burgos, nor the fact that she herself wrote poetry.

The newfound information about my grandmother's affection for Burgos' verses made me smile, particularly because my grandmother's fiery personality reminds me of the defiant spirit that characterizes both Burgos' life and art. It also made me realize how much of this project has connections with both my own and my family's experiences as Puerto Ricans. The Puerto Rican spirit is one of resistance and survival; in the face of more than five hundred years of colonization, Puerto Ricans continue to struggle for self-determination and self-definition, and this is expressed not only in their literature, but also in the daily events of their lives.

Ofelia Santiago Morales was born into a working class family in 1931 in Naranjito, Puerto Rico, and was the second eldest daughter of seven. Although a university education was uncommon for women from the countryside in this era, she wanted to be a teacher and was the first in her family to attend a university. She earned a

degree in teaching from the Catholic University in Ponce, where she met her husband, a young soldier named Diego Morales; after marrying in 1952, they returned to Naranjito, where Ofelia taught at a farmhouse school for several years.

Almost as soon as she began teaching, Ofelia had to learn to juggle work and her home life, as her husband was repeatedly called to serve in the Korean War. In 1958, Diego was stationed at Fort Bliss, and so Ofelia and her three children emigrated with him to El Paso, Texas, where they found a welcoming community of Puerto Ricans. Over the next three decades, Ofelia pioneered a new Spanish language program at Bliss Elementary, returned to the university twice (first to complete an additional two years of courses required for teacher certification in Texas, and then to earn her specialization in kindergarten education), translated English textbooks to help create and teach a bilingual curriculum for Hughey Elementary School, and underwent radical radiation treatment for cancer and survived, all while raising a family.

This quick snippet barely scratches the surface of the various struggles my grandmother encountered and overcame as a Puerto Rican woman raising a family in a border town during the civil rights era, often with her husband overseas, which was typical of the challenges that many immigrant Puerto Ricans faced at the time. Despite the hardships she faced, including a language barrier, racial discrimination, and the pressure to assimilate, Ofelia refused to let go of her cultural identity and actively worked to educate the next generation about the history and culture of her homeland long before the existence of Puerto Rican studies programs in the U.S. In pioneering a bilingual education program that integrated Latin American history and culture, she resisted the

dominant culture's English-only paradigm and belief that immigrants had to shed their ethnic culture in order to succeed.

But it is more than her specific achievements that stand out to me; it is her attitude of determination and ongoing resilience that I find remarkable and that echoes in the poetry of the writers I discuss in this project. It is her long-held belief that she, her daughters, granddaughters, and now great-granddaughters can accomplish anything they set out to do, regardless of the obstacles placed in front of them. Perhaps most importantly, it is her steadfast faith in humanity and social justice, and the ways in which she has lived her life according to these beliefs, even if and when they are unpopular. My mother, the youngest of my grandmother's children, inherited this spirit and is one of the most resilient women I know. Even with our ideological differences, she has taught me the art of resistance and the importance of holding true to those principles that matter to you most, even if you are the only one still standing.

So while the theoretical ideas for this project took shape in a course co-taught by University of Massachusetts Professor Martín Espada and Hampshire College Professor Wilson Valentín-Escobar entitled "Striking Back Against the Empire: Puerto Ricans, Colonialism, Rebellion, and Diaspora Communities," the roots go back even farther. Whether or not they encountered it in the literature they read, my grandmother and mother learned first-hand about the power and necessity of resistance from their own life experiences, and like the poets discussed here, they continue to pass that knowledge on to a new generation of Puerto Ricans.

This dissertation, then, examines how the work of four Puerto Rican poets – Julia de Burgos, Clemente Soto Vélez, Martín Espada, and Naomi Ayala – demonstrates a

poetics of resistance. By this I mean that their poetry asserts a political stance, is socially committed and concerned with social justice, espouses an anti-imperialist point of view, displays formal and linguistic innovation, and frequently becomes a realm of transformation for notions of self, citizenship, and community in a global era. Their poems depict transnational identities that are rooted in the history and cultural traditions of the island and also adapted to the new social circumstances in which they must exist. The identities they create vary, but include concepts of self that are multifaceted rather than fragmented, are predicated on movement and regeneration, have strong connections with the earth, and are often existential in nature rather than based on stereotypical classifications. Their verses do not merely reflect the experiences of second-class citizenship but reach beyond this to offer depictions of what a transnational, or in some cases, humanistic citizenship might look like. They present models of community that honor the rights of individuals to shape their own lives, and that also embrace the power of collective memory as a tool for survival. In the specific context of Puerto Rico, this poetics also entails a pervasive denouncement of colonialism, an effort at cultural decolonization, and the articulation of a Puerto Rican cultural identity that reflects and perpetuates its historical quest for self-determination. While resistance takes a variety of forms in their poetic discourse, each of these writers' poetry exemplifies a strong political sensibility and participates in the ongoing decolonial struggle of the Puerto Rico nation, which has generally been unacknowledged in the critical scholarship. In defining a poetics of resistance and illustrating it at work in the various poems I discuss, I draw on Barbara Harlow's definition of resistance literature, on Edward Said's concepts of

cultural decolonization, and on Jahan Ramazani's theory of transnational poetics, which I discuss in greater detail below.

"Puerto Rico Is In You": The Poetries of Burgos, Soto Vélez, Espada, and Ayala

Since the poetries of Burgos, Soto Vélez, Espada, and Ayala function as vehicles of resistance and cultural decolonization, their work must be contextualized within the corresponding social and political struggles that inform their verses; thus, in chapter two I offer a brief overview of significant events in Puerto Rican history that demonstrate this people's enduring opposition to colonial rule. In chapter three I examine what I call Julia de Burgos' 'poems of resistance,' which have received little critical attention, or in many cases, not been discussed at all. In contrast to her more lyrical poems (which are the ones more often studied), these poems display a more overtly political, and at times, even militant perspective and tone; in poems such as "Ours is the Hour," "23rd of September," and "Ibero-America Resurges Before Bolívar," Burgos advocates for independence, repudiates social and political injustices, and commemorates various national heroes who sacrificed their lives for liberty. I argue that in these poems Burgos employs a rhetoric of resistance through the use of repetition, personification, and war imagery in order to raise the consciousness of her fellow Puerto Ricans and to provoke her audience into action. As a dedicated political activist, Burgos fought for social justice and freedom from oppression in all its forms, and this sentiment is reflected the verses I discuss.

The work of Clemente Soto Vélez, which spans more than forty years, is the subject of chapter four. Like Burgos, he was actively involved in the Nationalist Party and migrated as an adult from Puerto Rico to New York City; while they both wrote for various literary and political journals, Soto Vélez became more actively involved in the

diasporic community and eventually became a literary mentor to the next generation of Puerto Rican writers. Even though he and Burgos were contemporaries, Soto Vélez was most prolific as a poet between the 1950s and 1970s. Much of his poetry is highly experimental, in terms of both form and content, and also tends to engage with metaphysical concepts. Although Soto Vélez fought for and desired Puerto Rican independence, as well as a classless society, these sociopolitical issues are often in the background rather than the foreground of his work. By examining his use of personification, anaphora, and most importantly, juxtaposition, I demonstrate how his poetry functions as a dialectical process; furthermore, I contend that the innovative form he develops throughout his poetic career reinforces his radical perspective for an egalitarian society. In the end, I believe that Soto Velez's poetic project exemplifies a consciousness of resistance and transcendence while pronouncing a cosmic vision of liberation.

Martín Espada, whose poetry is the focus of chapter five, was directly mentored and influenced by Soto Vélez. In contrast to Burgos and Soto Vélez, Espada was born and raised in the mainland U.S., and as a contemporary poet, continues to add to his body of work. As a self-described poet "of advocacy" (Dick and Fisher 23), Espada takes up the tradition of resistance he inherits from Burgos and Soto Vélez, but his poetry displays a stronger emphasis on the global effects of colonialism on humanity. While he denounces the injustices of Puerto Rican colonialism in his verses, he also protests the marginalization of Latinos, immigrants, and the working class; I argue that his rhetorical choice to position those who often occupy the fringes of society in the center of his poetic praise demonstrates one way in which his poetry embodies resistance. In addition, I

examine how the recurring tropes of history and music function as rhetorical strategies in Espada's poems, and posit that his (re)visionary accounts of significant historical events contribute to cultural decolonization.

In chapter six I examine the contemporary poetry of Naomi Ayala, a native born Puerto Rican who came of age in the United States as an immigrant; she moved to Connecticut at the age of fourteen and still resides on the East coast. Ayala acknowledges Espada as both influential on her work and also instrumental to launching her poetic career; in addition, their poetry shares a crucial characteristic as both employ music as a rhetorical strategy of resistance and transformation. In this chapter I argue that Ayala utilizes a variety of poetic techniques, including nature imagery and symbolism, repetition, allusion, and code-switching to craft a feminist discourse of resistance that testifies to and denounces social injustice and simultaneously expresses a female identity that seeks liberation through her understanding of history, her reverence for memory, and her relationship with the earth. Furthermore, in articulating a multifaceted identity that challenges notions of nationalism, her poetry illuminates the complexity of the modern Puerto Rican experience and participates in a discourse of transnational decolonization.

Literature of Resistance and Decolonization

My theorization of a poetics of resistance draws largely on Barbara Harlow's and Edward Said's concepts of the role that literature plays in the struggle for both liberation and decolonization. In *Resistance Literature*, Barbara Harlow examines various writers and scholars to establish "the integral relationship between armed resistance and resistance literature" (10). While armed struggles are obvious forms of resistance to

oppressive power structures, Harlow draws attention to the significance of cultural forms of resistance, which she believes are "no less valuable than armed resistance itself" (11). In defining resistance literature, Harlow states:

> Resistance literature calls attention to itself, and to literature in general, as a political and politicized activity. The literature of resistance sees itself furthermore as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production. (28-29)

She emphasizes that this analytical approach positions politics at the center rather than the periphery and maintains that this genre of literature cannot be separated from its historical reality. Moreover, Harlow asserts "the role of poetry in the liberation struggle itself has…been a crucial one, both as a force for mobilizing a collective response to occupation and domination and as a repository for popular memory and consciousness" (34). This latter point holds particular significance in relation to the poets discussed here, as their poetry not only engages the issue of memory but also becomes a space for the recovery, expansion, and perpetuation of collective memory.

Edward Said reinforces many of Harlow's ideas with his discussion of the role of art in cultural decolonization in his widely influential book, *Culture and Imperialism*. He believes that a literature of decolonization "form[s] a counterpoint to the Western powers' monumental histories, official discourses, and panoptic quasi-scientific viewpoint" (215) and argues that "the idea that resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history … certainly … *writing back* to the metropolitan cultures, disrupting the European narratives … [and] replacing them with either a more playful or more powerful new narrative style is a major

component in the process" (216). I take Said's understanding of resistance as entailing much more than a "reaction" as a jumping off point for investigating how the different poets not only depict but also create resistance within their verses. My project also works to uncover the "alternative" histories these poets produce as well as to illuminate the ways in which they offer readers different paradigms for understanding society.

Using Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* as his starting point, Jahan Ramazani examines the connection between poetry and decolonization in chapter seven of his book, *A Transnational Poetics*. Ramazani points to Said's notion of "ideological resistance" (209) as the basis for cultural decolonization, which for Said is "at root a poetic enterprise: it involves re-creating the land through the act of renaming it and thus imaginatively and linguistically repossessing it" (Ramazani 154). We see this very process at work in several of the poems I discuss, such as Julia de Burgos' "23rd of September," Espada's "The River Will Not Testify," and Ayala's "A Coquí in Nueva York "; in addition to "repossessing" the land, the poets are "re-creating and reclaiming a communal history" (Ramazani 155) in these verses, which Said views as a second characteristic of cultural decolonization. Ramazani takes this one step further and posits that, "to enable the emergence of freshly constituted communities and national identities, decolonization thus requires nothing less than the imaginative remaking of both space – the once expropriated topography – and time – the collective historical experience of that place" (Ramazani 155). Several of the poet's verses illustrate this process, most notably Espada's "Now the Dead Will Dance the Mambo" and "Every Throat" by Ayala.

Ramazani acknowledges that "decolonization is far from a finished process" (161) and that literary decolonization has by no means entirely erased the damage of

imperialism; however, he believes in the vital role that poets play, noting that "poetry helps remind us that decolonization is not only a political and military process but also an imaginative one – an enunciation of new possibilities and collectivities, new names and identities, new structures of thought and feeling" (162). Ramazani's emphasis on the newness that emerges from a poetry of decolonization is evident in the verses of each one of the poets, whether that takes the shape of a unique historical rendering, an innovative structure, or a novel depiction of identity. Ramazani also points out that "at the heart of his description of cultural decolonization, Said also emphasizes, perhaps surprisingly, a transnational humanism – what he calls the pervasive and 'noticeable pull away from separatist nationalism toward a more integrative view of human community and human liberation'" (156). All four of the poets under discussion were or continue to be social activists concerned with liberation on a variety of fronts, which unarguably informs their work and lends it this perspective that Said describes as a "transnational humanism."

Transnational Poetry

The thread of resistance I trace across the four authors' work progresses from one that is largely national or pan-Hispanic in character to one that is more transnational in scope.[1] In *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*, Carmen Theresa Whalen discusses colonialism, citizenship, and the Puerto Rican diaspora, and also reinforces the transnational nature of Puerto Rican identity, noting that colonialism has "meant continued migration and the formation of transnational communities, created at the

[1] In the introduction to his recent anthology, Roberto Marquez establishes the transnational character of contemporary Puerto Rican poetry, which he believes places it "both *here* and *there* and, as often, neither *here* nor *there* but in some hovering and still fluid – if paradoxically (historically) precisely rooted – *in-between,* doubly external frontier space that simultaneously contains *one* and *the other*" (xxxvi).

intersection between Puerto Rico and the States. These ongoing links between Puerto Rico and the States … fostered approaches to adaptation that promoted bilingualism and biculturalism" (227-228). As the prefix "trans" indicates, the transnational refers immediately to movement across or between nations and national borders. In an increasingly globalized world, national borders have become more permeable, enabling an unprecedented movement of people, commodities, and cultures from one region to another (Clifford), further destabilizing identification with a single nationality as a central marker of identity. While transnationalism, as a concept, methodology, and field of study, is still being defined by writers and scholars across various disciplines[2], it has gained currency in literary studies, replacing more traditional – and arguably, more simplistic – literary categories for writers and texts that cross multiple boundaries. As a relatively new field, transnationalism itself is not strictly bound by any one discipline or methodology. Thus, my understanding and use of the word transnational draws on scholars from various disciplines as well as from varied geographic and national locations.

While Julia de Burgos' and Clemente Soto Vélez's poetries begin to evince transnational leanings, it is in the verses of the two contemporary poets under discussion, Martín Espada and Naomi Ayala, who focus more broadly on humanistic concerns, that resistance takes on a transnational nature. Reacting to some of the limitations of postcolonial studies, transnational theory examines some of the same historical, cultural, and political issues embedded in contemporary literature, such as colonialism, the effects and echoes of empire, and the construction of national narratives. While this new

[2] Some of these writers include Gloria Anzaldua and Salman Rushdie (who offered early articulations of transnational identity), Julia Kristeva, Paul Gilory, Edouard Glissant, and Paul Giles.

approach takes the effects of colonialism into account, it moves beyond the relationship of the colonizer and colonized to examine the ways in which these writers take as their subject the correlation between migration/dislocation and the (re)construction of history, memory, knowledge, and identity. This framework enables one to better examine the work of Puerto Rican writers, who occupy a complicated, and often liminal, position within the landscape of American literature[3]; these writers are not exactly "postcolonial" since their homeland remains a colony of the United States, yet their lives and texts continue to be inherently shaped by empire, migration, and the intertwining of multiple cultures, languages, and histories. Pedro Malavet, one among many scholars who firmly asserts Puerto Rico's status as an American colony, also underscores the way in which the "othering" of Puerto Ricans in the United States, as well as their cultural hybridity, endows them with a distinct, and I would argue transnational, subjectivity due to migration. He states:

> Puerto Rico retains a national consciousness that is reflected in its popular culture…Puerto Ricans strong cultural nationhood contrasts with their lack of legal sovereignty…As U.S. citizens by law, Puerto Ricans are both normative (i.e., dominant) and "other" because of their puertorriquenismo (the state of being Puerto Rican). They are culturally normative on the island and legally and culturally "other," relative to the legal authority of the 'Americans'. (25)

According to Paul Giles, as well as scholars such as Paul Gilroy and Edouard Glissant, transnational texts move beyond the scope of the national, both acknowledging and depending upon "external points of reference" (Giles 6) to construct transcultural

[3] Several literary scholars, including Frances Aparicio, Carmen Rivera, and Roberto Marquez, discuss the liminal or marginal position of Puerto Rican writers in the U.S.

narratives; in other words, they engage and demonstrate the ways in which the complex histories of multiple nations are inextricable from and, thus, transform one another. Azade Seyhan also situates transnational literature at a “point of intersection,” where it looks both inward and outward simultaneously in order to express an “inter/transcultural dialogue” (4) across cultures, languages, histories, and geographies. In *A Transnational Poetics*, Jahan Ramazani lays the groundwork for classifying poetry he identifies as transnational and is careful to point out that not all “poetries are transnational in the same way” (20). He clarifies that he is not suggesting that “the nation will vanish from modern and contemporary poetry studies” (12) since many poets still seek to articulate and imagine a national identity; however, he cites Pascale Casanova, who says that several writers’ positions can be understood as “a double one, twice defined … inextricably national and international” (12). He notes that while some writers’ poetics may be centered in their country of origin, they “also participate through poetic, ideological, and other global circuits in transnational imaginaries” (12). Ramazani examines the work of poets such as Derek Walcott, Claude McKay, Christopher Okigbo, and Seamus Heaney (typically classified as postcolonial writers) to illustrate how “transnational and intercultural poetry imaginatively reconfigures the relations among the ingredients drawn from disparate cultural worlds and fused within its verbal and formal space” (18); in addition, he maintains that the space of a transnational poem demonstrates “a translocation, verbally enabling and enacting – between specific times and places – cross-cultural, transhistorical exchange” (96). All four of the poets in this study, but especially Espada and Ayala, display both this melding and exchanging of diverse geopolitical spaces, cultural practices, and languages within their verses. In one of his clearest

definitions, Ramazani asserts, "neither localist nor universalist, neither nationalist nor vacantly globalist, a *transnational poetics* highlights the dialogic intersections – sometimes tense and resistant, sometimes openly assimilative – of specific discourses, genres, techniques, and forms of diverse origins" (43). Burgos, Soto Vélez, Espada, and Ayala all assume the difficult task of navigating the intricacies of history, memory, and knowledge formation, resulting in intercultural or transnational poetries that also resist dominant or "official" narratives of the nation-state; in turn, this allows the poets to re-envision and recreate the past in order to understand, and ultimately transform, the present. These authors' texts, then, not only demonstrate a poetics of resistance, but also illustrate the heterogeneous and transnational character of Puerto Rican poetry.

From Nuyorican to "Diasporican": Critical Analyses of Puerto Rican Poetry

By examining how resistance figures in the work of the four writers under discussion, I enter the critical conversation on Puerto Rican poetry from a different perspective in that, unlike much of the scholarship, I do not organize my discussion around poets only from the island, or the diaspora, or from a specific movement or generation. Rather, all four of the poets I discuss participate in the circular migration pattern familiar to a large majority of Puerto Ricans, thus, their work has been informed by their experiences on both the island and the mainland, as well as by the journeys in-between. Moreover, their work often demonstrates a transnational perspective in that it expresses what Seyhan calls an "inter/transcultural dialogue" (4). The vast majority of the critical scholarship in English over the last thirty years has focused on the Nuyorican movement and the poets associated with this style; this makes sense to some extent since literature by U.S. Puerto Ricans did not gain national recognition until the 1970s with the

emergence of the Nuyorican Poets Café and movement (even though Puerto Ricans began publishing works in English at the turn of the twentieth century). The 1970s and 1980s also saw the emergence of critical and scholarly analysis of this literature by writers such as Miguel Algarin, Efrain Barradas, and Eugene Mohr, whose work, *The Nuyorican Experience* (published in 1982) is the first book-length critical study of U.S. Puerto Rican literature. Following Mohr's work, Asela Rodríguez de Laguna edited a collection of essays in 1987 called *Images and Identities: The Puerto Rican in Two World Contexts*. As the title suggests, the twenty-eight essays in this collection examine a range of themes concerning Puerto Rican identity both on the island and in the U.S, with a few giving particular attention to Nuyorican poetry.

With the rise of multiculturalism in the 1990s (and through the early 2000s), anthologies covering particular ethnic American literatures seem to dominate the critical landscape and a few essays on Puerto Rican writers start emerging in volumes, such as *Bendíceme, América: Latino Writers of the United States* (1993), *Dance Between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States* (1997), and *Latino Literature in America* (2003). A few recently published texts, including *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (2001), *Humor and the Eccentric Text in Puerto Rican Literature* (2005), and *Writing Off the Hyphen: New Perspectives on the Literature of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (2008), suggest an increasing awareness of diasporic Puerto Rican literature and its contribution to the American literary imagination.

Although the publication of the aforementioned texts is promising for the continuing visibility of Puerto Rican literature, the focus of the majority of these works is

fiction, while contemporary Puerto Rican poets continue to struggle for recognition in both the literary mainstream and the academy. In an interview with Bruce Allen Dick (published in his book, *A Poet's Truth: Conversations with Latino/Latina Poets*), Martín Espada addresses this reality, noting that while Latino fiction has experienced a 'boom,' "the same benefits have not panned out for Latino poets" (26) who also have much to say about the Puerto Rican experience. There is an undeniable lack of critical scholarship in English on Puerto Rican poetry; in fact, although numerous journal articles discuss the Nuyorican movement or examine the work of specific poets, there is not a single book-length, scholarly text in English solely devoted to critical analysis of Puerto Rican poetry. Much of the critical scholarship regarding the development of Puerto Rican poetry has been disseminated in the introductions of a handful of poetry anthologies published over the last forty years.

Before the peak of the Nuyorican movement, Alfredo Matilla and Iván Silén (themselves poets) edited a bilingual anthology, *The Puerto Rican Poets/La Poets Puertorriqeños*, in 1972. The collection contains a sampling of Puerto Rican poetry over the course of the twentieth-century with the purpose of bringing "together most of the important Puerto Rican poetry of this century for both Spanish- and English-speaking readers" (xiii). Matilla and Silén divide the book into three parts: "Part One: Most Important Poets Before 1955"; "Part Two: The Major Poets"; and "Part Three: Latest Poetry (from 1955)." In the prologue, the editors note that "a more politically oriented literature developed" (xiii) after the United States took control in 1898, and that Latin American modernism had a significant influence on Puerto Rican literature in the early decades of the twentieth century. They explain that modernism "affirmed the Indian

element common to all American cultures," and was particularly influential on the island because it "reaffirmed the Puerto Rican national culture in the face of North American cultural, economic, and political imperialism" (xiv). They cite the poetry of Luis Llorens Torres, who "struggled to find the roots of what is distinctively Puerto Rican" even though his "political position is based on nostalgia for Spain, the mother country" (xiv), and Evaristo Ribera Chevremont, whose "fusion of the 'classic' and the 'pure'" (xiv) gave him recognition among critics from Spain, as particularly representative of this period. In terms of poets writing in a slightly different vein during this era, they briefly note that Juan Antonio Corretjer was the "first poet to embody a revolutionary ambition in his work" (xiv), which influenced the work of Hugo Margenat as well as many others, and that the poetry of Francisco Matos Paoli centers around "a struggle to liberate himself from his obsessive idea of God" (xiv).

Part two of this anthology includes the work of three major poets – Luis Palés Matos, Julia de Burgos, and Hugo Margenat. The editors define a "major poet" as "one who, in a given historical moment, is able to re-embody in his inner self the reality in which he lives … he is both an echo and a new voice … his metaphoric language is new because it joins two almost irreconcilable extremes in a repressive society: the individual and the 'collective unconsciousness'" (xv). Matilla and Silén remark that Palés's *Tuntun de pasa y grifería* was "one of the first Caribbean poetic interpretations of the black experience" (xv) and that he was also one of the "first to create the myth of our gestalt by uncovering the Antillean subconscious" (xvi). In regards to Julia de Burgos, the editors claim that her poetry is "both lyrical and rebellious" and also defined by "a continuous attempt to maintain a balance in her existence, to yoke together the individual problem of

her existence with that of justice and country" (xvi). In the poetry of Hugo Margenat the editors see "the three great themes of Puerto Rican poetry, God, love, and country" (xvi), which they believe pass on to the young poets of the 1970s.

The third section, then, contains verses by these young poets, and the editors assert that while they attempted to select the most representative writers of this generation, the group of Guajana poets refused to cooperate with them and so are not included. This section contains the largest number of authors, with a mix of lesser-known writers, such as Marina Arzola and Billy Cajigas, along with some who would become well-known "Nuyorican" poets, such as Pedro Pietri and Tato Laviera. According to the editors, "the new poetry on the whole is an experience in crisis" and displays two tendencies: "one which is born from a kind of obstinate nationalism that leads to social realism, and the other, that of the poets who explore the revolutionary commitment from myth and hallucination" (xv). They view twentieth-century Puerto Rican poetry as engaged in "a struggle against the agony of the ghetto (in the colony and the metropolis) and against the imposition of a crushing colonial state of mind. It is a battle against the occupation of our soil and culture by the United States" (xv).

In 1975, *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*, edited by the founders of the Nuyorican Café, Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, was published. In the introduction, Algarín and Piñero contextualize the emergence of Nuyorican poetry through personal stories and excerpts from poems that employ the very type of raw, "street rooted" (16) language they set out to explain. They claim "the experience of the Puerto Ricans on the streets of New York has caused a new language to grow: Nuyorican" (15), which combines English and Spanish, and "yields new verbal

possibilities, new images to deal with the stresses of living on tar and cement" (15). Moreover, this poetry illustrates the hardships of daily life and "the conditions of survival" but "delivered in a new rhythm. It is a *bomba* rhythm with many changing pitches delivered with a bold stress. The pitches vary but the stress is always *bomba* and the vocabulary is English and Spanish mixed into a new language" (15-16). The anthology is divided into three parts, "Outlaw Poetry," "Evolutionary Poetry," and "Dusmic Poetry," and contains verses by poets such as Pedro Pietri, Sandra María Esteves, José-Angel Figeroa, Lucky CienFuegos, T.C. Garcia, Miguel Algarín, and Miguel Piñero, many of whom would become emblems of the Nuyorican style.

A few years later, *Inventing a Word: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Puerto Rican Poetry*, edited by Julio Marzán was published; it is one of the first English language anthologies of Puerto Rican poetry published in the U.S. that presents a broader range of poets. In the introduction, Julio Marzán outlines the poetic traditions that preceded twentieth-century Puerto Rican poetry, noting that he views the twentieth-century controversy in Puerto Rican poetry as a continuation of two distinct poetic traditions that developed on the island – separatism and reformism (xi). He explains that separatism sought political independence and posited cultural independence, and was closely associated with the freeing of slaves in the Hispanic Caribbean (xii), while reformism had strains of both autonomy and assimilation, and "viewed the island's culture as a provincial Spanish culture" (xii). According to Marzán, "the separatist writers…wrote in a language that attacked, exposed, or incited…Reformist writers, on the other hand…imitat[ed] the decorative shell of romanticism that influenced Puerto Rican literature" (xiv). The U.S. occupation in 1898 and subsequent Americanization

attempts politicized every aspect of Puerto Rican life and also "coincided with the *modernista* and post-*modernista* periods in Puerto Rico" (xvii). Marzán maintains that the majority of the poets of this generation, with the exception of Luis Pales Matos, "defended Puerto Rico's Spanish language and culture by celebrating its Hispanic heritage" (xix), which increased with the arrival of exiled Spanish writers as a result of the Spanish civil war. Following this period came the avant-garde movements of the twenties and the *criollista* movement in the thirties and forties, which "was a movement of intellectual, often academic, poets who write a "pure" poetry that consisted of elements taken from the island's rural folklore and its natural landscape" (xix) and constituted another reaction to Americanization.

Marzán briefly mentions two other poets – Juan Antonio Corretjer and Julia de Burgos – who "wrote of the island landscape but not in the purist style" (xix), and he offers a concise overview of how Corretjer's poetics differ from the purists. While Corretjer's poetry also defies Americanization and affirms a Puerto Rican cultural identity, his writing is openly political; moreover, "Corretjer identifies the island's culture with its Taíno past, both of which he sees as products of the land. Rising out of the land, Corretjer says, Puerto Rican culture will continue to regenerate despite efforts by Spain and the United States to keep it from flourishing" (xix). In my opinion, missing from Marzán's grouping is Clemente Soto Vélez, a contemporary of Burgos and Corretjer, who also writes poetry in this vein. Like other literary critics who come after him, Marzán notes how the literary climate changes in 1952 with the adoption of Commonwealth status and the emigration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland. He touches on Hugo Margenat's "poetry of mundane, concrete images" that challenged "the purist

poetics of the hispanist poetry establishment" (xxi) and notes how he influenced the political poets of the sixties who also rebelled against the purist aesthetic, viewing it as aligned with U.S. domination over the island.

Marzán turns to the first Puerto Rican poetry in English to come out of the mainland, giving specific attention to Pedro Pietri's *Puerto Rican Obituary*, and he notes how mainland poetry was also politically motivated and written in a "popular unpoetic language" (xxv). He maintains that the English-language poets were not influenced by the purist or hispanist tradition, but share similarities with the Puerto Rican-separatist aesthetic (xxv). His summary of these two distinct styles is useful: the hispanist-reformist tradition "tends toward the purely poetic, the lyrical, the metaphorical sublimation of social reality, and evinces a strong identification with Western or Spanish civilization. In this tradition, Puerto Rican history begins with the arrival of Ponce de León" (xxv); the Puerto Rican-separatist tradition "tends toward the anti-poetic, a stark representation of reality, and identifies with Latin America's American heritage. In this tradition, Puerto Rican history begins with the Taínos, with whom Puerto Rican culture is mythically identified" (xxv-xxvi). Marzán asserts that while these two traditions appeared to fuse together after the U.S. occupation, they became distinct again after 1952; moreover, he believes "the most recent poetry has sought two modes of liberation, one political and one of the imagination" (xxvi).

Martín Espada (who would become a highly regarded poet in his own right) picks up on these modes in his 1987 article, "Documentaries and Declamadores: Puerto Rican Poetry in the United States, " in which he maintains that the great migration from the island to the mainland in the 1950s and 1960s is one of the most important contexts for

twentieth-century Puerto Rican poetry (258). He notes that the presence of Puerto Rican poets in the U.S. can be traced back to the 1860s, but the first major figure to emerge was Clemente Soto Vélez (257) in the 1950s.[4] Espada outlines some of the major themes and techniques of this poetry, drawing mostly on poets associated with the Nuyorican movement, such as Pedro Pietri, Miguel Algarín, Victor Hernandez Cruz, and Sandra Maria Esteves, to illustrate his claims. He discusses how the Nuyoricans developed an innovative poetic style that employed code-switching between Spanish and English and whose rhythm was influenced by black words and music. Espada carefully points out, however, that an oral tradition was part of Puerto Rican poetry before its encounters with the black community in the United States. He notes that the "*declamador*, a dramatic public performer of memorized verse" (260) has been part of Latin American and Puerto Rican culture for centuries; in addition, he explains that the speech patterns and music of the Puerto Rican community, specifically salsa music, factor into the perpetuation of an oral tradition in Puerto Rican poetry.

Turning to the content of modern Puerto Rican poetry, Espada demonstrates how the island itself and Puerto Rican cultural identity feature as prominent themes in the work of many writers, thereby reflecting "the migration experience and the many complexities that experience entails" (260). His strongest critical claim comes near the end of the essay when he asserts, "perhaps the most striking characteristic of Puerto Rican poetry in the United States is its element of protest," which at times "manifests itself merely by [a] description of surroundings" (262). He discusses how poets

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[4] It should be noted that while Soto Vélez might have been a "major" figure among the Puerto Rican literary community of the time, his poetry did not gain recognition in either the literary mainstream or the academy, which I discuss in more detail in my chapter that examines Soto Vélez's poetry.

document, protest, and raise awareness around injustices in their communities that would otherwise go undocumented, and thus, "the traditional role of poet as community historian is perpetuated in the barrio" (263). Espada mentions a few women writers, including Rosario Morales and Luz María Umpierre, who write from a "feminist perspective," notes how the voices of the Puerto Rican diaspora have begun to spread beyond New York City, and explains how some writers, such as Rivera, Esteves, and Algarín, have a "definite anticolonial strain in their work" (263); this is a subject he takes up in an essay published more than twenty years later, "The Lover of a Subversive is Also a Subversive: Colonialism and the Poetry of Rebellion in Puerto Rico." In this 2010 essay, Espada discusses the colonial context that continues to shape Puerto Rican poetry, which has often "articulated the vision of independence, creating an alternative to the official history of the kind propagated by occupiers everywhere" (12). He looks at verses by Julia de Burgos, Clemente Soto Vélez, Juan Antonio Corretjer, Francisco Matos Paoli, Jack Agüeros, Aracelis Girmay, and even his own, to demonstrate a long standing tradition of poets who vehemently protest the colonial situation of their country and "continue to clamor for the island's independence" (12).

In his book, *Dance Between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States*, William Luis has a lengthy chapter devoted to Puerto Rican American poetry. He begins the chapter by looking at Juan Flores's 1983 book *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*, in which Flores outlines four categories that comprise Nuyorican poetry and consciousness; Luis notes that "Flores's four categories set the stage for a meaningful dialogue on Nuyorican identity" (38) but also points out that Flores does not touch on Puerto Ricans living outside of New York, who "also

represent an important and growing component of Puerto Rican American consciousness" (38). With his chapter, Luis seeks examine a selection of Puerto Rican poetry that both fits within and goes beyond the categories Flores establishes. He emphasizes that there has been a reciprocal influence between mainstream North American writers and Puerto Rican writers, and that the "intersection between North American and Hispanic or Puerto Rican culture" is evident in the work of various Puerto Rican poets, going as far back as William Carlos Williams. While the third section of the chapter looks at poets writing outside of the Nuyorican tradition, such as Rosario and Aurora Levins Morales, Luis devotes most of the chapter to discussing poets associated with this style.

In "Making the Decolonized Visible: Puerto Rican Poetry of the Last Four Decades," Pedro López Adorno looks at the "relationship between subalternity and cultural visibility in the context of Puerto Rican literary production" from the 1960s to the end of the twentieth-century while also providing an overview "of each decade's major poetic environments and representative poets" (5). Adorno maintains that the poets from the 1960s onward "realized that their work had inherited a decolonized poetic tradition that can be traced to 19th-century poets" (6); however, in the first half of the twentieth century, " … the literary production of Puerto Ricans constantly encountered political, institutional, and ideological barriers that curtailed their possibility of reaching a larger readership nationally and abroad" (7). Beginning in the 1960s, though, poets "sought to deploy a variety strategies for obtaining patronage and recognition" (7). Adorno mentions the various poetic movements and/or styles that preceded the 1960s, such as "*jibaro* poetry; negrista poetry; Atalayista; *neocriollista*" and the

"*transcendentalista* poets" (8, 9) and offers a few names and titles to accompany each respective period. According to Adorno, the poetry of 1960s on the island, best represented by Andrés Castro Ríos and José Manuel Torres Santiago, "was dominated by a grand narrative that politicized and secularized the language of the lyric poem while adhering, for the most part, to traditional poetic forms (12); Adorno views the group of university students called "Guajana" as the most influential of the decade, whose "metaphors, images, symbols, allegories, and heroes … pointed the informed and socially conscientious readers toward an ethics of national sovereignty and decolonization" (13). The 1970s saw the emergence on the island of *Ventana* poets, such as Jose Luis Vega and Salvador Villanueva, whose "conscious departure from the politicized agenda of the *Guajana* poets also signaled a shift from the critique of grand narratives to the fragmented narratives of the individual" (13). Coinciding with the *Ventana* poets was the emergence of the Nuyorican movement on the mainland, in which poets tended to focus "on the individual and his/her search for a liberating identity articulated from the margins of the social, historical, political, and economic displacements the respective subjects have had to endure" (15).

Adorno notes how in the 1980s and 1990s, the poetic discourses multiplied and diversified to create what he calls a "babelic implosion" (15); he laments the fact that the "literary implosion" of these decades, rather than creating a tight-knit network of island and mainland writers, "has generated a chaotic array of literary cells (some smaller, some larger) only interested in their individual endeavors" (16). He maintains that mainland authors have borne the brunt of this "literary disenfranchisement" but have also found ways to challenge the marginalization imposed upon them. Adorno concludes the article

by noting that even though by the mid-1990s there was a "greater commitment on the part of certain poets to bridge the gaps that traditionally kept them away from the mainstream literary establishments and from each other" (16), there is more work to be done if Puerto Rican "literary production is going to stand on equal footing with the literature of other communities and nations" (16).

One scholar in particular (albeit working closely with several others) has taken up this challenge, and in 2007 the most comprehensive English language anthology of Puerto Rican poetry to date*, Puerto Rican Poetry: An Anthology from Aboriginal to Contemporary Times*, was published. In addition to editing the collection, Roberto Márquez translated many of the poems from their original Spanish into English; as he notes in the introduction, this collection differs from other anthologies (that typically focus on a particular era, and most often, on the twentieth-century) in that it contains texts from before the arrival of Columbus up to the twenty-first-century, with the goal of offering "a more overarching glance at the general arc and contours of Puerto Rican poetry" (xxv). Rather than detailing the various aesthetic influences and poetic traditions that comprise Puerto Rican poetry, Márquez's introduction looks more broadly at the various social, political, and historical contexts that shape the poetry of each period. As a result, Márquez organizes the collection into four sections: "Book One: Before Columbus and After, 1400-1820"; "Book Two: The Creole Matrix: Notions of Nation, 1821-1950s"; "Book Three: Critique, Revolt, and Renewal"; "Book Four: Of Diasporas, Syncretisms, Border Crossings, and Transnationalizations: An AmerRícan *Sancocho*."

The focus of book four is the development of Puerto Rican poetry in the United States, which Márquez believes demonstrates some continuity with what came before but also illustrates a "radical break with the canonical sources, conventions, and structures of feeling of both insular and U.S. literary history and their previously fixed cultural assumptions" (xxxvi). He maintains that because two interdependent national spheres "constitute the twofold site of the contemporary Puerto Rican experience … situated on the island and … in the continental venue(s) of the U.S." (xxxiv), Puerto Rican writers continually unsettle geographic, linguistic, and literary boundaries, and challenge traditional categories such as "Puerto Rican Literature" or "U.S. Poetry" (xxxv). According to Márquez, these poets of the diaspora (who he labels "diasporicans"):

> def[y] and openly challenge[] the continuing aptness of any exclusively insular, strictly territorially bordered, or single-language-circumscribed nineteenth-century patrician notions of nation and citizenship in the context of both structurally programmed and enduring circuits of (im)migration and the realities of a regularly commuting population…the work of these "new Creoles" in any case, demand[s] "new definitions" that [a]re…less reductively homogenized perceptions and concepts of Puerto Rican reality, identity, nationality, and notions of nation. (xxxv-xxxvi)

At the end of the introduction, Maárquez touches on how the poets of the diaspora, like the poets who preceded them, also document their communities' refusal "to reconcile themselves, in either locality, to a status and condition of abiding economic or social-cultural marginality" (xxxvi). I take up this thread in more detail in my own project,

which illustrates resistance as an enduring, if continually evolving, trope in Puerto Rican poetry.

Since Puerto Ricans possesses a complex (and controversial) relationship to the United States, and they experience a unique subjectivity within the nation, analyzing their literature requires a multilayered approach. Classified as ethnic "minorities" in the U.S., Puerto Rican writers are usually grouped with other Latino/a writers in literary anthologies, and an examination of their work from the theoretical perspective of U.S. ethnic studies has dominated the scholarly criticism for several decades. While an ethnic studies[5] approach illuminates crucial aspects of and themes in this literature, it has its limitations in addressing issues of nationalism and national identity within the texts. What's more, Puerto Ricans seem to represent the transnational within the national[6]: that is, they challenge the geographic boundaries of the nation (as well as the scope of the national imaginary), subvert traditional markers of national identity, especially through language, and redefine hegemonic notions of Puerto Rican identity. Thus, some scholars have recently transitioned to utilizing transnational theories and methodologies to analyze Puerto Rican literature. For example, the authors of various essays in the recent

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[5] As Singh and Schmidt have shown, US Ethnic Studies scholars often divide into two schools – the postethnicity school and the borders school. While the postethnicity school stresses, "a progressivist narrative of the U.S. as a society of increasing inclusion," (6) the borders school "stresses how the affected groups invented strategies of border crossing, "passing," hidden cultural memories, and alternative public spaces in order to survive" (8). Singh and Schmidt assert that borders school studies seems to be the prevailing framework for more US Ethnic Studies scholars because it "challenge[s] dominant narratives of ethnic difference and exclusion that intertwine with and support simplistic narratives of pluralistic inclusion" (8).

[6] This concept stems from Azade Seyhan's definition of transnational literature, and communities she identifies as "paranational," which "are communities that exist within national borders or alongside the citizens of the host country but remain culturally or linguistically distanced from them and, in some instances, are estranged from both the home and the host culture (10).

collection, *Writing Off the Hyphen: New Perspectives on the Literature of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (2008), take into account how migration patterns, diasporic conditions, and the process of transnationalism influence literary themes in Puerto Rican literature. While these analyses tend to focus on issues of personal, cultural and national identity, they do not examine the modes of resistance that run throughout the texts, which is a gap this dissertation seeks to address.

In this project, I employ a methodology that draws on postcolonial, ethnic, and transnational studies to analyze the work of Julia de Burgos, Clemente Soto Vélez, Martín Espada, and Naomi Ayala and to illuminate the ways in which these writers repeatedly traverse national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries; this approach also takes into account the specific historical, political, and social contexts from which these writers emerge and that influence the representations of history, memory, politics, and identity in their texts. All of the poets discussed here engaged or continue to engage in civic activism and social movements associated with the decolonization of Puerto Rico, and their poetry cannot be divorced from these influences. Moreover, their verses not only work alongside the anti-colonial struggle, but also denounce the global effects of colonialism and empire. Through their art, then, Burgos, Soto Vélez, Espada, and Ayala give voice to a Puerto Rican poetic tradition that is steeped in both resistance and a quest for self-determination.

CHAPTER II

PUERTO RICO'S HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

It is impossible to fully understand the art of these poets without knowing the historical and political contexts that shape their writing. This requires an overview, albeit a brief one, of the long history of resistance in Puerto Rican culture. Despite inaccurate historical portrayals of the Puerto Rican people as "docile" and "gentle" (Steiner 236), Puerto Ricans have been fighting for their independence since Columbus invaded the island in 1493. In his book, *The Islands: The Worlds of Puerto Ricans*, Stan Steiner seeks to dismantle the "myth of docility" (236) that has characterized the Puerto Rican people, and he establishes a historical record of Puerto Rico's resistance and rebellion against colonial powers. While El Grito de Lares (the uprising of Lares in 1868) is often cited as the first rebellion that sought to establish an independent Republic of Puerto Rico, Steiner cites multiple revolts on the island before and throughout the nineteenth century (preceding El Grito) that "reflected the fight for independence" (238). He notes that as early as 1511 (and again in 1513, 1520, 1526 and 1530) the Borinquén Indians fought against the Spanish conquistadores, and they were soon joined by African slaves, whose "wars of independence" would continue for "four centuries" (Steiner 237).

El Grito de Lares, which occurred on September 23, 1868, is one of the most well-known and commemorated events in Puerto Rican history and its leader, Ramón Emeterio Betances, is considered the founder of the Puerto Rican independence movement and nation. The founding document of this uprising ("The Ten Commandments of Free Men" written by Betances) highlights the oppression of the Puerto Rican people and outlines ten specific demands for freedoms, the first of which is

the abolition of slavery. The five hundred Puerto Ricans that participated in the uprising were protesting against Spain's colonial repression and declared an independent Puerto Rican nation. Although El Grito de Lares failed because of an informer, it had a profound impact on the Puerto Rican people and "to this day … serves as a symbol of the centuries-long resistance of the Puerto Rican people to colonialism" (Murillo 21). In recounting one of the anniversary celebrations in Lares, Steiner notes, "it was a shrine of the war of independence that had been lost, not won" (215). This event is commemorated not only with anniversary celebrations on the island, but also by the poets, for "when a revolution is not won, it has no end" (216).

In 1898, during the Spanish-American war, Spain ceded Puerto Rico (along with Guam and the Philippines) to the United States and the island passed from one colonial power to another. The U.S. declared the island a United States Protectorate in 1900 under the Foraker Act, and in 1917 President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones Act, which granted Puerto Ricans United States citizenship. Carmen Theresa Whalen asserts that the granting of United States citizenship in 1917 "did not resolve the status of Puerto Rico or of Puerto Ricans in the States. Puerto Ricans continued to migrate as a "colonial people" and were still perceived as "foreigners" and people of color" (25). After World War II, the United States government and other American employers recruited Puerto Ricans (especially the rural poor) as low-wage laborers; as a result, Puerto Rico became the "site of the one of the most massive emigration flows of this century" (Malavet 2), which continues to alter Puerto Rican culture and identity both on the island and the mainland. Pedro Malavet also underscores how the "othering" of Puerto Ricans in the United States leads to their continued oppression and marginalization from mainstream

culture. In 1952, Puerto Rico became a Commonwealth of the United States, a status that continues to blur issues of national identity for both island and mainland Puerto Ricans. Accordingly, the island attained a local self-government, and adopted its first constitution, under which Puerto Ricans would "retain their U.S. citizenship and continue to be exempt from federal taxes, elect their local officials but have no vote in federal elections, and continue to be represented in Congress by their resident commissioner, a nonvoting member of the House of Representatives" (Morris 48). Thus, Puerto Ricans remain a colonized people who continue to be divided on questions of nationalism, particularly in relation to U.S. statehood, independence, or enhanced commonwealth status for the island.

César Ayala and Rafael Bernabe maintain that the period from 1929-1938, from the crash of the U.S. stock market to the founding of the Partido Popular Democrático on the island, is "the most turbulent period of Puerto Rican history under U.S. rule" (95); significantly this is also the period that profoundly shapes the poetic consciousness of Clemente Soto Veléz and Julia de Burgos. Several factors contributed to this tumultuous decade on the island, including a depression in the world sugar industry in the spring of 1930, a steady rise in unemployment, and increasing chronic poverty (Ayala and Bernabe 95). Social unrest on the island also intensified, as several factions, including laborers, dockworkers, and even consumers mobilized between 1933-1934 and went on strike (96). As a result, the U.S. reorganized sugar production, which led to a federal intervention in the Federal Emergency Relief Act. While this provided relief for many, it also came with "authoritarian initiatives" (97), and the appointment of General Blanton Winship in 1934 as governor, who would authorize the massacre in Ponce in 1937.

The political landscape of the island also shifted during the 1930s, as several movements emerged that attempted to alter the colonial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. The Partido Unión (renamed the Partido Liberal) lost its dominance, and due to an increased suppression of civil rights and liberties on the island (by both their own governor and the U.S) a strong cultural nationalism emerged, led by Pedro Albizu Campos. In addition, the strength of the Partido Socialista started to decline and Luis Muñoz Marin led the Partido Liberal, which sought to "promote social reforms and eventual independence, in coordination with the New Deal" (95). As Mario Murillo points out, the two major figures to emerge at this time – Pedro Albizu Campos and Luis Muñoz Marin –"would have a lasting impact on Puerto Rican history…[thus] it is useful to understand the role that these two leaders played in the struggle for the island's self-determination" (30).

The Partido Nacionalista, formed in 1922, "was created and built for, the political and intellectual leaders of the island, who voiced the independence sentiment and style of their time" (Steiner 231). Murillo explains the Nationalists did not recognize the authority of the United States "to control the internal affairs of the island" and at the beginning they "carried out their campaign through legal, political means" (31), using the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as "justification for their struggle" (31). After this approach failed, Albizu Campos and the Nationalists resorted to violent attacks in an attempt to oust the colonial government, and believed the only way to fight U.S. military violence was with violence. Albizu Campos reorganized the Nationalist party and was elected as their president 1930. Murillo maintains that, "for Albizu, the struggle for Puerto Rico's independence could not be separated from other liberation and

anti-imperialist movements across the Americas and around the world" (Murillo 31). Although the strength of the Nationalists grew during the Depression (and a majority of Puerto Ricans supported independence), U.S. sugar companies controlled the economy and Washington's policies toward its colony. Thus, in an effort to cripple the U.S. sugar companies and diminish their political power, Albizu Campos organized the small sugar farmers; after leading several cane strikes, the working class viewed him as a "workers' revolutionary" (232) rather than an elite intellectual, which set the stage for his establishment of a uniformed and armed Cadet Corps.

After the police killed four Nationalists in October 1935, Nationalists Hiram Rosado and Elías Beauchamp killed Police Commissioner Francis Riggs in 1936, for which they were shot and killed in turn. Ronald Fernandez clarifies that the "Nationalists never hid their anti-colonial intentions" and that Albizu Campos' "speeches always had the same aim: to create the *moral intensity* which moved Puerto Ricans to try and overthrow the Spanish in 1868" (74). Albizu Campos and the Nationalist Party's "militant discourse and advocacy of armed struggle" (Ayala and Bernabe 110) made them objects of U.S. government surveillance. Thus, the Nationalist Party members had been under investigation by the U.S. government for some time, and the death of Commissioner Riggs led to the indictment of Albizu Campos and eight other Nationalist leaders (including Soto Veléz) for "conspiring to overthrow the government of the United States" (110). They were found guilty in 1937 and transported to a federal penitentiary in Atlanta.

1937 was also the year of "one of the most dramatic event[s] of the decade" (Ayala and Bernabe 116) in Puerto Rico. The Nationalists had organized a peaceful

march for Palm Sunday through the city of Ponce to commemorate the abolition of slavery. However, their permit was revoked at the last minute and twenty-one people were killed when the police "opened fire on an unarmed column of the Cadetes de la República" (116). According to the ACLU, "The Ponce Massacre was due to the denial by the police of the civil rights of citizens to parade and assemble. This denial was ordered by the Governor of Puerto Rico, Blanton Winship" (Fernandez "The End" 88). Like El Grito de Lares, the Ponce Massacre persists in the collective memory of Puerto Ricans and continues to symbolize their enduring resistance to colonialism even in the face of violent oppression; additionally, Rafael Cancel Miranda adds that, "the attack of 1954 [on Congress] was rooted in the Ponce Massacre" (Fernandez "The End" 88), which demonstrates the interconnectedness of the island's uprisings from decade to decade.

Preceding the attack on the House of Representatives in 1954, though, was the Nationalist uprising in 1950 that, once again, led to Albizu Campos' imprisonment. In 1948, President Truman reinstituted the peacetime draft, which Albizu Campos and many other Nationalists rejected on the basis that it was, "with respect to its application in Puerto Rico, totally unconstitutional within the legal framework of the United States Constitution" (Fernandez "The End" 71). They did not believe Puerto Ricans should "soldier for the independence of others" (71) such as Germany, Italy and Korea, when the U.S. government denied the independence of the Puerto Rican people. In another attempt to curb the civil rights of Puerto Ricans, the U.S. passed *La Ley de La Mordaza,* or the Gag Law, in 1948, which "made it illegal to advocate the violent overthrow of the government of the United States" (Ayala and Bernabe 160); many Puerto Ricans viewed it as an explicit attempt "to muzzle, not only the Nationalists, but the 'deep in their bones'

independence sentiment of a substantial portion of the Puerto Rican people" (Fernandez "The End of" 71-72). Albizu Campos became outraged again when governor Muñoz Marin, who had formally announced "he was no longer an *independentista*" (Ayala and Bernabe 157) in 1946, agreed to a bill whose language confirmed Puerto Rico as a possession of the United States and when President Truman signed Public Law 600 in 1950. While this law allowed the Puerto Rican people to draft their own constitution, it did not change the fundamental relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico. The United States retained federal jurisdiction over the island, therefore, Public Law 600 was viewed as a continuation of colonial status (Ayala and Bernabe 163-165).

Although the Nationalists had been planning an armed insurrection since the late 1940s, the passage of Public Law 600 (combined with intelligence obtained by the Nationalist party that the U.S. government planned to eliminate the independence movement) led to an immediate revolt with the objective of causing " a political crisis in Puerto Rico and to embarrass Washington internationally" (165) with the hopes that the U.N would not accept P.L. 600 as legitimate. The recording of this event illustrates the subjective (and arguably inaccurate) nature of historiography, as some accounts entirely omit the fact that a woman led the revolt. According to Carlos Rovira, on "October 30, 1950, a young woman named Blanca Canales led an armed contingency of Nationalists towards the city of Jayuya where they attacked the headquarters of the colonial police" and forced them to surrender. With the support of the people of the town, "the freedom fighters raised the Puerto Rican flag that was strictly prohibited by colonial law" and Blanca Canales, with a weapon in her hand, shouted "¡Qué viva Puerto Rico libre!" and "defiantly declared the independence of the Republic of Puerto Rico" (Rovira). The

Nationalists also attacked the governor's mansion in San Juan, engaged in armed battles with the police in Utuado, Ponce, Mayagüez, Arecibo, Naranjito, Ciales, and Peñuelas, and two Nationalists attempted to shoot their way into Blair House, the temporary residence of then President Truman.

In addition to being located in the mountains, Jayuya was strategically chosen as the headquarters for the revolt since Canales had a supply of weapons and the insurgents thought they would be able to slow troop reinforcements to the western side of the island (Rovira); it is also where the Nationalists had the biggest impact, "burning the police station and federal post office and holding out in the surrounding fields until November 2" (Ayala and Bernabe167), and so the uprising of 1950 is also known as the Jayuya Uprising. As Rovira notes, U.S. military airplanes were deployed to bomb Jayuya, the National Guard was sent in to suppress the uprising and regain control of the city, and the colonial government imposed martial law on the island. In the end, twenty-five people were killed, seventy percent of the city of Jayuya was destroyed and "more than 1,000 Nationalists as well as *independentistas* and Communists not connected with the insurrection were arrested" (Ayala and Bernabe 167) under the Gag Law. According to Rovira, the U.S. government worried about the political impact of this event on an international level and so they "imposed a news blackout of the situation in Puerto Rico" and "in order to disguise the nature of events Truman characterized the conflict as 'between Puerto Ricans'." Just as in previous decades, the U.S. media portrayed Albizu Campos and his followers as "fanatics instead of revolutionaries, assassins instead of liberators" (Fernandez "The End" 81). Albizu Campos was arrested on November 2, 1950, charged with violating the Gag Law, and imprisoned once again.

After his election as governor in 1948, Muñoz Marín began proposing new status reforms that, while proclaiming to secure autonomy for Puerto Rico, actually represented a "reformed colonial model" (Ayala and Bernabe167). Largely through the efforts of Muñoz Marín and the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), then, the *Estado Libre Asociado* (ELA), officially translated as the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, took effect on July 25, 1952.[7] In November 1953, the U.S. government finagled a resolution that removed Puerto Rico from the U.N.'s list of non-self-governing territories, despite the fact that the U.S. government retains "all necessary power to change any and all facets of Puerto Rican life" ("The End" 85). Thus, the oldest colony in the world would no longer be under the scrutiny of the United Nations nor subject to its decolonial efforts. Albizu Campos responded once again by conspiring with "Lolita Lebrón to stage an assault that would catch the world's attention" ("The End" 90-91), and alert them to the cause of Puerto Rican independence. On March 1, 1954, Lebrón, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irving Flores, and Andrés Figueroa Cordero unfurled the Puerto Rican flag, yelled "Viva Puerto Rico Libre" ("Long Live a Free Puerto Rico") and opened fired on the House of Representatives. Five lawmakers were wounded, and the four Nationalists were convicted and imprisoned for attempting to overthrow the U.S. government. They served twenty-five years in prison before being pardoned by President Jimmy Carter in 1979; upon her release, Lebrón was welcomed as a national hero in Puerto Rico and continues to participate in pro-independence activities.

Although the Nationalist Party increasingly lost political strength after the 1950s (as the Partido Popular Democratico gained in popularity), Puerto Ricans continued to

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[7]As Ayala and Bernabe note, "the date chosen was no coincidence: July 25 was the date of the first landing of U.S. troops in 1898" (168).

engage in acts of resistance, both on the island and the mainland, throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Just as in the United States, the 1960s and 1970s were a time of social upheaval in Puerto Rico, where various social movements emerged that "challenged diverse aspects of Puerto Rico's economic and/or political dynamics, from the environmental consequences of industrialization to the U.S. military presence … students mobilized against the draft into the U.S. armed forces … [and] between 1969 and 1975, labor unions fought several major battles" (Ayala and Bernabe 223). The reemergence of labor activism began "with the strike of 1,200 workers at the General Electric plant in the area of Palmer in Río Grande from October 1969 to July 1970" (233); although they encountered repeated aggression by the police, they were supported by the community as well as by *independentista* activists. Following the Palmer strike, the Movimiento Obrero Union (MOU) was created in 1971, which coordinated most of the labor activism; it also supported a vital struggle in the early 1970s, "the seven-month strike in 1972 at *El Mundo*, Puerto Rico's largest newspaper" (233), where strikers and police engaged in violent clashes. According to Ayala and Bernabe, "strike activity peaked in 1974 when almost 40,000 workers were involved in strikes, including teachers of the public school system, university nonteaching staff, and the employees of the water services agency" (233). Feminist and gay activism was also on the rise on the island in the 1970s, increasing the visibility of issues such as "discrimination and harassment, restrictive family legislation, contraception and abortion rights, women's sexuality and sexual orientation" (235). Meanwhile, in the United States, "the 1960s signaled the emergence of a new political activism in the Puerto Rican diaspora" (Ayala and Bernabe 223), where groups such as the Young Lords, the Puerto Rican Student Union, and

ASPIRA organized for better living and working conditions, protested against police harassment and racial discrimination, and fought for the right to bilingual education.

In the 1970s, several new *independentista* groups emerged both on the island and stateside, such as the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacíon Nacional (FALN) in Chicago 1974 and the Ejército Popular Boricua-Macheteros on the island in 1978. Ayala and Bernabe note that “between 1974 and 1981 the FALN took responsibility for close to 120 bombings, mostly directed at U.S. government agencies (Department of Defense, FBI, military recruiting stations) or the offices of multinational corporations (Sears, Mobil, Citibank, Chase Manhattan)” with the goal of making “U.S. colonial rule increasingly costly to the federal government and less secure for U.S. investors” (283). In 1979, the Macheteros attacked a U.S. Navy bus and in 1981 they destroyed eight fighter planes at the National Guard Air Force Base in San Juan (283). In a less violent but perhaps more effective manner, environmental activists joined with leftist organizations to campaign against and ultimately prevent the government from pursuing proposed mining projects in the central part of the island; they also began protesting against the U.S. navy’s use of the island of Culebra for amphibious landing practice, which had been taking place since 1923. After occupying navy-held lands beginning in 1971 and protesting for several years, the activists’ demands were met and in 1975 President Ford ordered the navy to leave Culebra (Ayala and Bernabe 231). The struggle against the U.S. military’s presence in Puerto Rico then shifted to Vieques (an island-municipality of Puerto Rico), where a mass movement mobilized between 1998-2003.

In his book, *Islands of Resistance; Puerto Rico, Vieques, and U.S. Policy,* Mario Murillo examines the effects of the long-standing presence of U.S. armed forces in Puerto

Rico, giving particular attention to military actions on the island of Vieques and subsequent acts of resistance by the Puerto Rican people. He writes:

> It seems as if protest and resistance were always meant to be part of the social fabric on Vieques. In 1514, Taíno chiefs Cacimar and Yaureíbo fought to the death on the island they originally called Bieque. Their struggle proved to be the last of the indigenous resistance in Puerto Rico to the Spanish Crown. In 1874, workers in the Hacienda de Playa Grande in Vieques rebelled against the repressive working conditions of the Spanish colonizers. (48)

By 1941 the navy had taken control of more than seventy-two percent of the Vieques, and dozens of residents, who refused the military's command to leave, were forcibly removed when bulldozers flattened their homes (48). In the ensuing years, residents and fisherman, especially those in the Vieques Fishing Association (VFA), were "at the forefront of the call to stop the bombing and get the navy out once and for all" (57). In 1979 several fisherman and their supporters were arrested while protesting against the navy's fishing restrictions and the environmental damage to marine line, fisheries, and vegetation as a result of naval war games, and in 1989 hundreds of families invaded close to eight hundred acres of navy-held land after federal marshals tried to evict Carmelo Felix Matta from his property (48-49).

Tensions between Puerto Rican residents and the U.S. military continued, and in 1998, during the 100th anniversary of the U.S. invasion, Puerto Rican activists began calling increased attention to the detrimental effects – on the environment, the livelihood of fishermen, and the health of the population – of the U.S. military presence on the island; however, it was in 1999 that their struggle gained world-wide attention. On April

19, 1999 Vieques resident and civil security guard on the naval base, David Sanes Rodríguez, was killed by a 500-pound bomb "dropped by navy planes that missed its target on the Navy's practice range. His death sparked massive protests not only in Vieques, but throughout Puerto Rico and in the United States, and rekindled the resistance to foreign occupiers that has been part of its history since the sixteenth century" (Murillo 50). This immediately led to mass protest, where "hundreds of civilian protesters built camps on the navy-held beaches" (Ayala and Bernabe 300) and occupied the area for thirteen months. On February 21, 2000 "the largest march in Puerto Rico in recent times (estimated at 150,000) reasserted the demand that the navy quit Vieques" (301); acts of civil disobedience and clashes continued, with approximately 1,300 people arrested between May 2000 and May 2003. The protesters finally prevailed, and in 2003, President George W. Bush ordered a stop to military activities in Vieques.

The most recent demonstrations of resistance on the island have come from students at the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras, who went on strike in April 2010 to protest tuition increases and a lack of transparency in university finances. After barricading the entrances to the university, they set up make-shift camps and shut down the university system for two months (Sosa-Pascual and Fitzsimmons); during this time, there were repeated, and at times violent, clashes between the protesters and the police. According to Lauren Siben, the university "reached an agreement with student-government leaders after a two-month strike over a proposed change in tuition exemptions. Part of the settlement required that the university not demand the $800 fee until January 2011…Students protested the fee again in December. The extra charge is intended to compensate for the university's budget deficit of roughly $70-million"

(Siben). In February 2011, students resumed their demonstrations and marched in protest of an "$800 special fee that they said threatened the university's accessibility to low-income students … students participating in the march, which was organized by the Student Representation Committee, demanded that the university repeal the fee and eliminate the police presence on the campus" (Siben). Unlike the protests in the spring of 2010 and winter of 2011, in which police reportedly "pushed students into the pavement; applied pressure-point techniques to the backs of their necks, under their eyes, and on their temples and throats; and sexually assaulted some female students" (Siben), the recent march ended without any violence or arrests. While the events outlined here are certainly not the only incidents of Puerto Rican rebellion against colonial rule, for the purposes of this project, they demonstrate the continuity of the Puerto Rican people's resistance to oppression and attempted subversion of their colonial status that continues to this day.

CHAPTER III

"WITH THE TORCH IN MY HAND": JULIA DE BURGOS' POEMS OF RESISTANCE

"Río Grande de Loíza!...Great river. Great flood of tears.
The greatest of all our island's tears
save those greater that come from the eyes
of my soul for my enslaved people"

-Burgos, "Rio Grande de Loiza"

In her most renowned poem, Julia de Burgos exclaims, "When the multitudes run rioting…against everything unjust and inhuman / I will be in their midst with the torch in my hand" ("To Julia de Burgos" 37, 41-42). It is not difficult to perceive the spirit of revolution and resistance that emerges at the end of this poem, yet this characteristic of Julia de Burgos' work has been rarely discussed in the scholarly criticism that exists in English (which, admittedly, is sparse). Many scholars have examined her poetry in terms of her early feminist perspective and quest for self-identity, aspects that should not be overlooked when reading her verse; however, Burgos also wrote several overtly political and militant poems throughout her life that continue to play an important role in Puerto Rico's decolonial struggle and poetic tradition of resistance. I identify these verses as her 'poems of resistance'; as such, they denounce oppression, incite revolution, serve as records of significant historical figures and events, and function as sites of rebellion and transformation.

Although largely unrecognized outside of literary circles, Julia de Burgos has been acclaimed as Puerto Rico's greatest poet, inspiring future Puerto Rican writers, female and male, island and mainland alike, with poetry that has been variously described as political, romantic, feminist, and subversive. She was a fiercely independent woman

who, at times, served as her own publisher and distributor. Fellow Puerto Rican writer Jack Agüeros identifies her as a "revolutionary woman" (xxi) who defied traditional boundaries both in her life and her writing, and who was deeply invested in the cause of Puerto Rican independence. Despite coming of age as a poor woman in the colonial and patriarchal culture of early twentieth-century Puerto Rico, she rose to political prominence by the young age of twenty-two, acquired a strong literary reputation before publishing even one book of poetry, and in a prominent Puerto Rican magazine was compared to "Chile's Gabriela Mistral, Argentina's Alfonsina Storni, [and] Uruguay's Juana de Ibarbourou" (Agüeros xvii), all of whom possessed international reputations.

Burgos was one of the many writers of her day (along with Clemente Soto Vélez and Juan Antonio Corretjer) who actively participated in the Puerto Rican liberation movement; she was a member of the Nationalist Party, which "articulated a sharp rejection of U.S. political and economic control" (Ayala and Bernabe 105), advocated armed revolution in the name of Puerto Rican independence, and "during World War II … continued to denounce U.S. colonialism while underlining that they were equally opposed to its imperialist rivals" (110). Burgos met Nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos in 1934 and in 1936 was elected Secretary General of the Women's United Front for a Constitutional Convention (for whom she gave a speech that aimed to rally women around the idea of independence); she also "participated in activities of the Partido Nacionalista during that crucial year" (Ayala and Bernabe 129). Thus, as a high profile member and speech-writer of this organization, Burgos began to merge politics and art. According to Juan Antonio Rodriguez Pagan, between July 1936 and 1937 Burgos "erupts with patriotic and proletariat verses that address with ardent fervor the colonial

situation prevailing in her country" (137, translation mine). He notes that she begins to be known as the "Sweetheart of Nationalism" because of her "songs" or poems for liberty (137). According to Harlow, one feature of resistance literature is that "the poets, adherents and partisans of given organizations with national identities, manifest in their poems a consciousness of the larger arena within which they write" (46). The themes of liberation, rebellion, and justice in Burgos' poetry both reflect and advocate the ideologies of the Nationalist Party, while at the same time perpetuating her own feminist struggle for autonomy.

In addition to the information Pagan relates about Burgos' political and poetic activity, Ayala and Bernabe confirm that "[b]etween 1938 and 1943, she wrote poems not only about Albizu Campos but also about San Juan's best known slums (La Perla and El Fanguito), in support of the 1938 dockworkers' strike, in memory of Cuban anti-Machado fighter Rafael Trejo, in praise of Soviet Russia … and against facism and aggression in Spain and China" (129). Therefore, as a poet, Burgos denounced oppression wherever she saw it exist; in this way, her verse realizes another aspect of resistance poems, which "actively engage in the historical process of struggle against the cultural oppression of imperialism, and assert thereby their own polemical historicity" (Harlow 37). As a form of cultural resistance, Burgos uses her art as a vehicle of political expression to participate in and perpetuate the struggle of humanity for self-determination in all of its myriad forms.

The critical scholarship in English that does exist on Burgos tends to focus aesthetically on the lyrical qualities of her work, and thematically on the author's continuous search for and articulation of identity (both personal and artistic). The

omission of Burgos' 'poems of resistance' from certain studies has one logical explanation. It is likely that most scholars who wrote essays in English before 1997 did not have access to these poems. While researching Burgos' life, Agüeros came across references by other writers to titles of poems he had not seen before, and so he began searching for what he calls the "Lost Poems"; after three years, he had found fifty poems in "obscure magazines, flyers, journals, etc" (xxxvii). They appeared in English for the first time in Agüeros' 1997 *Song of the Simple Truth: the complete poems of Julia de Burgos*, which is the most comprehensive (and bilingual) edition of her work to date. Most of the poems I discuss in this chapter belong to this category, and while Agüeros does not provide the specific publication information for each poem, he does note that the "great majority of her poems were written in the ten years between 1933-1943" (xxxix).

In her essay, "I am the Life, The Strength, The Woman: Feminism in Julia de Burgos' Autobiographical Poetry" Consuelo Lopez Springfield situates Burgos as an early feminist Puerto Rican poet, arguing that "at the heart of her autobiographical poetry lies a rhetorical quest to justify a female poetics" (55). Springfield emphasizes the importance of recognizing the historical climate in which Burgos lived and wrote, noting that she worked both within and against patriarchal social and literary conventions. Springfield analyzes a handful of Burgos' poems that exemplify "her struggle to free herself from social and literary confinement, to redefine herself, her art, and her society" (55). Carmen Esteves' essay, "Julia de Burgos: Woman, Poet, Legend" largely situates Burgos' work in relation to her biography. She provides short analyses of her major poems in terms of the themes they reveal, looks briefly at what each collection of poems demonstrates, and notes how Burgos' poetic voice shifts over time. Esteves emphasizes

the layered and multivocal nature of Burgos' poems, which she believes lends them multiple 'readings' and interpretations. Like several other critics, Esteves mentions Burgos' involvement with the Nationalist Party and how she published several poems "of a political nature" (228), but she does not treat any of these poems at length.

Iris Zavala-Martínez examines the life and work of Burgos alongside the sociohistorical context of her day, which was a time of upheaval, and her personal life history, which was repeatedly marked by loss and pain; as a result, she sees a dialectic emerge in the author's poetry that she believes to be the driving force of her creativity (13). Zavala-Martínez notes that she also utilizes "a feminist psychological perspective" in her analysis, and that one of her aims is "to uncover the relationship between life events, poetic discourse, and the personal self" (3). To do this, she interweaves biographical information and statements from Burgos' personal letters with analyses of select poems to show how the author "conveyed and consolidated her internal subjective experience of objective social realities into a concrete form" (22). While Zavala-Martínez's reading acknowledges the complex social realities that influenced Burgos' work, she focuses her analysis on how the author mediates "the confluence of and relationship between personal history and sociohistorical events" (24) through her poetry. Like Esteves, she notes that Burgos wrote "militant poems addressing the issues of oppression" (11) and she briefly references one these poems – "We are Closed Fists" – to show that the author "sided with human emancipation" and that her "consciousness had no borders; she was transnational; she was concerned with justice for all humanity" (22). Finally, Nelly E. Santos examines the various symbols Burgos employs (such as rivers, waves, birds, the sea, furrows, sails, and shipwreck) to analyze the themes of love and

death in her poetry. She looks at the trajectory of Burgos' three major collections, and concludes that "Julia de Burgos is pre-eminently a lyric poet, and the poetry of all great lyric poets is the verbal incarnation of their most intimate life and feelings" (145). Santos considers Burgos' neo-romantic lyric poetry her major contribution to Latin American contemporary poetry, thereby positioning her within an international context.

While Burgos' feminist sensibility and quest for authenticity are undeniably important (and even central) components to her writing, they do not characterize the totality of her poetic oeuvre; her active participation in political movements and dedication to decolonial struggles throughout the world were equally important aspects of her life and art. In a letter she wrote from Cuba in 1940 to her sister, Consuelo, she reminds her that she must "never forget that to have true social justice in our country – whether it's called Communism or whatever – the one-starred flag that defines us as Hispanoamericans in America first has to wave freely and alone over every building, every palm tree, and every crossed heart" (DeCosta-Willis 51). This sentiment – for social justice and independence – resonates passionately throughout her poetry and is reflected in the verses I have chosen to discuss. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to give visibility to Burgos' poems of resistance that have received little critical attention, or in many cases, not been discussed at all. This will, I hope, provide a more complete and multifaceted picture of her artistic work and the complex poetic voice she cultivated for over twenty years.

Biographical and Historical Contexts

Julia Constanza Burgos Garcia was born on February 17, 1914, the first of thirteen children, in a rural area of Puerto Rico called Barrio Santa Cruz, situated high

and deep in the mountains. Jack Agüeros notes that "her father was part German on his mother's side and either Julia's mother or father, or both, probably had some African blood and certainly had Spanish blood" (v). This is significant because Burgos is one of the first Puerto Rican poets to openly identify with her African heritage (DeCosta-Willis 43), which she celebrates in her poem, "Ay, Ay, Ay of the Kinky-Haired Negress" when she states "Black chunk of black in which I sculpt myself, / ay, ay, ay, my statue is all black" (*Song* 12-13). Her childhood was marked by poverty and tragedy (six of her siblings died), and coincided with the bestowal of United States citizenship upon Puerto Ricans as well as a resurging independence movement on the island (Agüeros v, vii). Despite her family's poverty, Burgos earned a scholarship to and graduated from the University of Puerto Rico with a degree in elementary education in 1933. This was also the time of the depression both in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, high unemployment, labor strikes, and the rise of the Puerto Rican Nationalist party. She worked as a schoolteacher in the village of Naranjito for one year and wrote for a radio program called School of the Air, from which she was allegedly fired for her political beliefs (Agüeros xiii).

At the age of twenty, Burgos married Ruben Rodríguez Beauchamp in 1934, and it is in the 1930s that she began publishing her work in journals. Her first collection of verse, *Precise Poems for Myself* was published only privately in 1937, and is not even cited as her first book of poems by most critics. For reasons that remain unknown, she divorced Beauchamp in 1937, which was uncommon for a woman at the time and certainly affected both her social and literary reputation on the island (Zavala-Martínez). After her divorce, she began signing her poems 'Julia de Burgos.' In many Latin American and Spanish-speaking countries, it is traditional for a woman to take her

husband's last name with the added designation "de," which literally translates as "of" but idiomatically means "belonging to." This practice reinforces the patriarchal nature of many of these cultures. Therefore, as Agüeros clarifies, Burgos' signature represents both "a defiant announcement" and invention of herself, for it indicates that "she will henceforth be of herself, for signing Julia de Burgos is like signing Julia who belongs to herself" (xv). This is only one, but a highly significant, way in which Burgos defies traditional boundaries imposed upon women and resists the prevailing social norms of her society and culture.

Poem in 20 Furrows, widely considered her first book of poetry, was published in December 1938; *Song of the Simple Truth* followed in December 1939 (Agüeros xxxi). She met a young physician named Juan Isidro Jimenes Grullón, who all critics agree was the love of her life, in April 1938, and continued her challenge to social convention when she moved to Cuba in July 1940 and lived openly with him for two years, which was also very unusual for a Puerto Rican woman at the time. Unfortunately, Grullón's wealthy parents threatened to disinherit him if he married Burgos, and upon their failed relationship she moved to New York City in 1942. At first, Burgos experienced the hardships of living in New York as a single, unemployed woman; however, in 1943 she began writing for the New-York based journal *Pueblos Hispanos*, and had a series of romantic relationships throughout the rest of her life. She married Armando Marin in 1944, a musician (and possibly bookkeeper/accountant) and they moved to Washington D.C., where she was unhappy and felt isolated from her homeland and culture. They moved back to New York in 1946 and by the late 1940s she was reported to be seeing someone else. Burgos struggled with both alcoholism and mental health issues for

several years before being hospitalized at Goldwater Memorial Hospital in 1953; Agüeros notes that at the end of her life, Burgos was "a Puerto Rican migrant suffering from health [and] alcohol problems" (xxv). She died on a street in Spanish Harlem without identification in 1953, but eventually her body was returned to her birthplace and she was celebrated "as a national hero" (xxxv).

In her literary life, Burgos read and was influenced by Cesar Vallejo, Garcia Lorca, Walt Whitman, and Pablo Neruda, whom she met in Cuba and who told Dr. Juan Bosch that "Julia had been called to be a great poet of America" (Agüeros xix). While living in Cuba, Burgos sent her third (and what would become her final) collection of poems, *The Sea and You,* to her sister in Puerto Rico, but it was not published until a year after her death, in 1954 (xxxvii). Several critics, such as Springfield and Esteves, believe her poetry anticipated the work of feminist writers such as Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath, and Roberto Márquez contends that her poetry foreshadows some of the "topical emphasis and emotional inflections" (219) of the Nuyorican writers of 1960s and 1970s. Although Burgos was born a *jibara* (peasant) woman, subject positions that placed her at the bottom of Puerto Rican society, she refused "to accept imposed societal roles" (Esteves 233), a resistance that is embodied in her poetry.

Burgos' Early Political Voice

While resistance is the defining characteristic of the poems I discuss, I have divided my discussion of these poems into two sections – political activist poetry and commemorative poetry – based on the different aspects of resistance poetry they exhibit. Before delving into the discussion of these poems however, I want to offer brief, but alternative, readings of two of Burgos' most analyzed and anthologized poems: "To Julia

de Burgos" and "Rio Grande de Loiza." Most analyses of these two poems focus on the feminist perspective they espouse; my reading highlights her rhetoric of resistance and demonstrates how these verses serve as early articulations of Burgos' political poetic voice and consciousness.

In "To Julia de Burgos" the author renders the apostrophe self-reflexive in order to demonstrate the dichotomy of her identity. She structures the poem as an introspective vivisection in which she denounces the second person, "you," or her public self, and embraces the first person, "I," her private and more authentic self. This authentic self is the one that emerges from her poetic voice and does not adhere to the conventions of patriarchal Puerto Rican society. While Burgos' declaration "I am life, strength, woman" in this poem will later establish her as a feminist pioneer in Puerto Rican literature[8], she makes another important move in this poem, and one that has not been given the attention it deserves. In the last three stanzas, Burgos more explicitly critiques the class structure of Puerto Rico and positions herself among the working class. She rejects "You, flower of aristocracy" who is crucified in the next stanza, and instead embraces, "me, flower of the people" (31). More important than this identification, however, is her pronouncement of herself as an activist in the last stanza. She declares: "When the multitudes run rioting / leaving behind ashes of burned injustices … / against you and against everything unjust and inhuman / I will be in their midst with the torch in my hand" (37-38, 41-42). Here, Burgos employs a specific rhetoric of resistance to speak out against injustice; this is an

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[8] For an in-depth discussion of this poem, see Collen Kattu's "The Plural and The Nuclear in 'A Julia de Burgos;'" other discussions include Carmen Esteves' "Julia de Burgos: Woman, Poet, Legend," and Consuelo Lopez Springfield's, "I Am the Life, "I Am The Life, The Strength, The Woman: Feminism in Julia de Burgos Autobiographical Poetry."

early articulation of the political voice that emerges in her later poetry that denounces oppression and inequality in all of its numerous forms.

She makes another pronouncement of this sort at the end of "Río Grande de Loíza, " which pays tribute to this "great" (41) river that flows through her hometown in Carolina. Several critics note how the poem functions as a journey through the life cycles and also demonstrates a yearning for sexual freedom. Miriam DeCosta Willis calls the poem "an erotic evocation of a woman's longing for sexual freedom and fulfillment" (44), and Consuelo Lopez Springfield concludes that "Burgos' autobiographical persona, personified in nature, demands sexual independence" (62). Throughout the poem, Burgos draws inspiration from the river, which serves as her "wellspring" and where she goes to "find new furrows" (13, 16) as both a child and adult. As Springfield observes, Burgos utilizes personification throughout the poem so that she can address the river directly ("Elongate yourself in my spirit") and move the reader through her changing relationship with it. While her childhood "was all a poem in the river" (17), in adolescence, her relationship with the river becomes "a beautiful romance"; she then tells the river: "you awoke my soul and kissed my body" (21, 22). The river's image then shifts again, and becomes specifically masculine at the end of the poem, as she declares it "Most sovereign river mine. Man river. The only man / who has kissed my soul upon kissing my body" (39-40). This comparison reinforces the romantic relationship she posits with the river earlier in the poem, particularly since the river is personified as "kissing her body" for the second time.

Although she describes the river as independent with the word "sovereign," she also adds the possessive "mine," indicating that the river belongs to her. Springfield also

addresses this “paradoxical” image of the river, as it “embodies traditional ‘feminine’ properties…[and] also bears ‘masculine’ attributes” (62). Thus, her relationship with the river is at once complex and all-encompassing; that is, it sustains her physically (through its natural characteristics and life-giving qualities), sexually, and psychologically (through the emotion it conjures up for her). As in “To Julia de Burgos” this poem illustrates Burgos’ rejection of conventional gender roles and norms, as she explicitly celebrates her sexual awareness and artistic process.

While the poem serves on one level as a reflection “on the emergence of her poetic voice” (Springfield 62), I argue that it also functions as a repository of cultural and historical memory. In the ninth stanza she writes:

> Rio Grande de Loiza!...Blue. Brown. Red.
> Blue mirror, fallen piece of blue sky;
> naked white flesh that turns black
> each time the night enters your bed;
> red stripe of blood, when the rain falls
> in torrents and the hills vomit their mud. (31-36)

Just as Puerto Ricans represent a mixture of Taino Indian, African, and Spanish as a result of colonization, so the river combines “Blue. Brown. [and] Red,” and carries the nation’s history of conflict within it. The color red, associated with the word “blood” (35) likely alludes to those who have shed blood fighting for Puerto Rico’s independence in the hillside towns of Lares and Utuado, not far from this “Great river” (41). When Burgos’ desires become one with the river, whom she implores, “confuse yourself in the flight of my bird fantasy” (11), she seeks to connect on the most intimate level possible

with her fellow Puerto Ricans. While the river serves as a source of inspiration in her early life and poetry, it becomes emblematic of the Puerto Rican people's suffering under colonialism as she matures and as the poem progresses. In the last stanza, the river becomes a

> Great flood of tears.
>
> the greatest of all our island's tears
>
> save those greater that come from the eyes
>
> of my soul for my enslaved people. (41-44)

Here, Burgos physically shares in the suffering and "tears" of her fellow Puerto Ricans, and also confronts their ongoing oppression. Thus, her poem also serves as a denunciation of the injustices the "enslaved people" of Puerto Rico endure under colonial rule.

Political Activist Poetry

The poem "Ours Is the Hour" is a direct call to arms, where Burgos employs repetition and a rhetoric of resistance to incite the Puerto Rican people to rebel against "the imperialism of the United States" (16). The poem, written and published in September 1936 (Pagan), has the impassioned feel of a rally cry, as it reads and sounds more like a persuasive speech than a poem. In fact, Burgos blurs generic lines here by combining elements of poetry and public speaking.[9] This makes sense given the fact that she was at the height of her political involvement with the Nationalist Party, for whom

[9] It is interesting to note that the structure of "Ours Is the Hour" loosely follows Monroe's Motivated Sequence, a technique used for organizing persuasive speeches that was developed in the 1930s by Alan H. Monroe. In this pattern, the speaker first captures the attention of the audience, shows that the problem that exists is significant (by giving specific examples), provides a viable solution, describes the expected results, and ends with a direct call to action (Monroe).

she wrote and delivered speeches, her most well known being "Women Facing the Pain of the Nation" in October 1936. Both this poem and her speech have the same purpose: to rally Puerto Ricans (and women in particular in the latter) to the cause of independence. Scholar Julio Antonio Rodriguez Pagan notes that "between July 1936 and 1937 de Burgos erupts with patriotic and proletariat verses of intense emotion when faced with the ongoing colonialism that reigns in her country" (137, translation mine).

She boldly begins the poem with an apostrophe that admonishes those who have not joined the struggle for independence:

> Traitors and Judases
>
> tremble!
>
> Ours is the hour
>
> Ours! (1-4)

Burgos' allusion here to the apostle Judas, a powerful symbol of betrayal in Christianity, would likely have a powerful effect on her predominantly Catholic, Puerto Rican audience. She aligns herself with this intended audience through her use of the word "our," which effectively distinguishes herself from the insular government, or the "traitors," and connects her with "noble peasant" (14) and working class. The repetition of the word "ours" ten times in the poem demonstrates Burgos' attempt to build class consciousness and solidarity, which she views as essential for "victory" and the creation of a "free nation" (68, 71). The short, declarative sentences in this first stanza function as emphatic pronouncements that establish the didactic mood of the poem. Her language is simple and direct, appropriate for the "exploited masses" (7) she addresses, and is also a characteristic of resistance poetry, which Harlow explains is often more linguistically

sparse (50). As part of the struggle against imperialism and domination, resistance poetry often does not conform to literary or poetic conventions, particularly on a formal level; instead, these poems demonstrate other aspects, such as a polemical quality, "where the very bareness of the language is part of the offensive, [and] represents a critical dimension of the poems' attack on certain forms of cultural imperialism" (Harlow 50). In this stanza, we get a glimpse of the combative attitude that develops throughout the poem, while her confident and passionate tone underscores the urgency of her message.

In the second stanza, Burgos first employs logos, or a logical appeal, to directly inform her reader: "already the peasants' battlecry approaches /and the masses / the exploited masses awaken" (5-7). She then utilizes pathos, in the form of rhetorical questions, to draw on the emotions of her readers. She asks them,

> Where is the little one who in rickets unleafed his life?
>
> Where is the wife who died of anemia?
>
> Where is the vegetable patch she helped plant, she dead today?
>
> Where is the cow?
>
> Where is the mare?
>
> Where is the land? (8-13)

With specific detail, these questions point to the suffering, sorrow, and injustices the peasants have experienced, from the death of their loved ones to the loss of their land and way of living as farmers. These questions also reflect the social milieu within which Burgos writes; it is in the 1930s that the agrarian way of life begins to erode, U.S. sugar companies dominate the economy, and chronic poverty becomes severe (Ayala and Bernabe 95-96). It is also important to remember that Burgos experienced this type of

poverty and tragedy first-hand, as we know that six of her siblings died before reaching adulthood, which adds to the emotional intensity of her claims.

Burgos blames the "imperialism of the United States" as the cause of Puerto Rico's impoverished state and "disgrace" (15). In the fourth stanza, she encourages her people to fight back and instructs them, "sharpen your hoe / whet your machete" (25-26), a call to armed revolt that she repeats in varying phrases in nearly every stanza that follows. Examining the words used throughout the poem, such as ""battlecry," "machete," "tremble," "grab," "seize," "ranks of," "blood," "traitors," and "vile savagery," reveals that Burgos employs a discourse of war and violence to express the harsh realities of Puerto Rican life under colonialism. She seeks to show the working class, whether they are farmers, "day laborers," "seamstresses," or sugar mill workers, that they share in the "tragedy" and "disgrace" (31, 32) that colonialism has thrust upon them and that they must "come close" (36) to one another and present a united resistance. Her use of exclamation points throughout the poem emphasizes the importance of her message and the need she sees for quick and deliberate action. She implores the masses to join "our cause" and exclaims,

> Grab your hoe
>
> …seize your machete
>
> and embrace the ranks of INDEPENDENCE! (62-64)

As the only word capitalized in the entire poem, "Independence," and the struggle it entails, stands out as a key theme and functions as the message of the poem. At this historical moment, the independence movement was gaining momentum, and Burgos' optimism that Puerto Rico will become "a free nation [that] will join the concert / of the

great peoples / of Hispanic America" (71-73) shines through. As in her poem, "A Song to the Hispanic People of the World," Burgos again positions Puerto Ricans within the Latin American, not North American, family and reinforces Puerto Rico's connection to other Antillean nations who have fought for and won their sovereignty.

While tyranny is an abstract concept, its execution has material and physical consequences, which Burgos demonstrates through its personification:

> And tyranny will dance its dance
> – the macabre dance of departure –
> wrapped in the blood of the thousand traitors
> who have nourished
> their vile savagery
> and their cowardice. (74-79)

The poet describes those who behave as tyrants as both evil and cowardly, and she makes a clear connection between tyranny and death through her use of the words "macabre" and "blood." While tyranny has caused the suffering of countless Puerto Ricans, Burgos subverts the power dynamics here; tyranny has its own violence thrust upon it as it is "wrapped in the blood" of those who keep the colonial forces in power. In these lines, Burgos deliberately employs a rhetoric of resistance that casts the colonizers, not the colonized, as uncivilized; in this way, her poem both challenges long-standing colonial ideologies and cultural productions that have cast indigenous populations as uncivilized and "writes back," in Said's terms, to the metropolitan culture with a "new narrative" (216). Despite the gruesome images depicted, Burgos does not end the poem on a

dreadful note. Rather, she reinforces her revolutionary rhetoric in the last stanza with her proclamation:

> Assemble companions,
>
> assemble,
>
> ours is the hour!
>
> Ours!
>
> Ours!
>
> Ours! (80-85)

The word "assemble" here harks back to "tremble" in the first stanza and shows the progression the speaker has made in the poem from excoriating the injustices committed against her people to mobilizing them to join the armed struggle. This formal element, then, mirrors the thematic content of the poem, as Burgos seeks to move her audience from objection to action. Her use of indented lines throughout the poem also demonstrates how form and content reinforce one another in her work; if read alone, these lines convey the main themes of the poem.

Juan Antonio Pagan also reads "Ours Is the Hour" as a call to armed revolution and as a protest against injustice. Throughout the poem, Burgos both engages with and overturns formal poetic conventions by combining traditional literary devices such as allusion, repetition, and personification, along with characteristics of resistance poetry, such as sparse language and a polemical tone. This demonstrates Burgos' knowledge of and skill with poetic techniques (we know she was well read) and her ability to utilize them in a subversive way. By defying poetic traditions, she signals a challenge to the

status quo – that is, the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. – that she strived to overturn in both her life and art.

The poem "Ibero-America Resurges before Bolívar" shares many similarities, both formally and thematically with "Ours Is the Hour" and serves as another example of Burgos' revolutionary poetry. The title alone indicates insurgency through its allusion to Simón Bolívar (a key leader in Latin America's independence movement) and use of the word "resurges," which has connotations of revival, uprising, and even battle (themes that will resonate throughout the poem).[10] She denounces United States imperialism even more forcefully than in the previous poem and she employs a series of metaphors that encourage the reader to see the inevitable connection between Puerto Rico's colonial status and armed rebellion. As in the previous poem, Burgos begins this one with an apostrophe, while also employing personification:

> Soul of America
>
> detain yourself in Puerto Rico
>
> and gather your voice
>
> pray energetic protest
>
> pray intense pain! (1-5)

She addresses the "soul" or essence of America, who possesses a "voice" of "energetic protest" and invites it to manifest itself in her homeland. I read her use of the word

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[10] The term "Ibero-America" refers collectively to the countries of the Americas that were formerly colonized by Spain or Portugal. It consists of all the Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas, in addition to Brazil, but does not include the United States. The use of this term in the title is important for understanding the "America" she addresses and speaks about within the poem. She distinguishes between the United States and what she calls "America," as she uses the term "Yankee imperialism" (15) in stanza three to refer to the United States and their political practices in Puerto Rico. This is an important distinction since the terms America and the United States are often conflated in public discourse within the fifty states.

“soul” as referring to the core principles of democracy and freedom, which nearly every country in “Ibero-America” fought a revolution to obtain and whose various national heroes she alludes to later in the poem. Throughout the poem, Burgos views this soul as under attack and encourages its revival.

Burgos constructs her message of rebellion in this poem through metaphor, allusion, and a discourse of war/revolution. There are more than forty words that signify or denote armed conflict in the name of independence, some of which include “imperialism,” “rebelliousness,” “blood,” “struggle,” “liberty,” “empire,” “armies of Liberty,” “patriots,” “heroic sacrifice,” “free nations,” “sword,” “oppressor,” “crusade,” and “war.” Burgos’ word choice alone reflects the social and political injustices the Puerto Rican people face as one of the only Ibero-American countries that still suffers under a colonial system of government. In the second stanza, she informs the soul, “you have fallen wounded / in the middle of the Caribbean” (9-10). The third stanza then begins with a repetition of this metaphor of the soul as a fallen soldier:

> You have fallen wounded
> by the dagger of the barbaric
> Yankee imperialism
> that rips you,
> to satiate its desires
> of perverted monster
> in the half opened flower
> of your fresh ingenuousness. (13-20)

The "soul," or the ideals of democracy and freedom have been "wounded" or stifled by imperialism and thus have not come to fruition in Puerto Rico. Instead, the U.S. exerts political, economic, and military domination over this country, a concept that Burgos conveys through the image of the U.S. as a monster that figuratively rapes the island, which is depicted as a "half opened flower." By depicting Puerto Rico as a feminized landscape Burgos participates in the nationalist rhetoric of her time, during which many Puerto Rican writers personified the homeland as female but its patriotic ideals as masculine (Lopez-Springfield 64). This violent image powerfully conveys the detrimental effects of colonialism, which the speaker encourages the "soul" to fight against in the next stanza "until you feel / that the soul of Bolívar / stirs in you!" (32-34).

For Burgos, Bolívar symbolizes hope and the sacrifice necessary to achieve emancipation, and thus she implores others to draw on his strength. She believes "Bolívar is / the struggle for holy liberty!" (40-41) and that

> The soul of Bolívar,
>
> is in Puerto Rico.
>
> Vibrant in Albizu Campos, and in the seven patriots
>
> who find themselves behind bars
>
> for defending the holiest ideal; (51-54)

Here, the author asserts that Bolívar's legacy lives on through the Puerto Rican Nationalists, thereby correlating Puerto Rico's struggle for independence with those throughout Latin America, a connection she draws in many of her poems. Her use of extended allusions in the next stanza reinforces this connection and emphasizes the long

tradition of resistance and sacrifice in “America Hispanic” (61) to which she believes Puerto Rico belongs. She writes:

> America Hispanic
> America of Duarte
> of Sucre
> of San Martín;
> America bronzed
> of Bolívar
> of Hostos
> of Maceo
> and Martí; (62-69)

In these lines, Burgos equates “America” with its great liberators by alluding to independence leaders of the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Chile/Peru, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, respectively. In addition to Bolívar, whom she has already immortalized, she honors Eugenio María de Hostos, a Puerto Rican educator and lawyer who actively fought for Puerto Rican and Cuban independence in the late nineteenth century; Antonio de la Caridad Maceo, who was second-in-command of the Cuban Army of Independence and credited with inspiring Jose Martí, who founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party, died in battle and is considered one of Cuba’s national heroes. Besides identifying “America” in relation to this revolutionary history, she points out its “Christian” (70) heritage, claiming that the liberators were “stirred / by impulses from God” (75-76) and concludes the stanza by instructing “America Latin / rebel / against the yankee invader!” (77-79).

In these lines, the author implores the countries of Latin America to fight against the increasing influence (both economic and cultural) of the United States.

Burgos' punctuation is also worth noting in this stanza. By positioning each historical figure on his own line, she draws attention to their individual contributions; however, there is no punctuation between the names Duarte, Sucre and San Martín, or between Bolívar, Hostos, Maceo, and Martí. These run-on lines allow the reader to see the continuity from one liberator to another, and enable Burgos to demonstrate the collective political consciousness of Spanish America. Finally, by punctuating the stanza with semicolons (each time before the word "America") the author shows the interdependency of the three Americas she identifies: Hispanic, Christian, and Latin.

In her final metaphor Burgos declares, "Puerto Rico is the sword / that will delay the advance / of the saxon empire!" (84-86). By comparing her homeland to a weapon (again employing imagery that reflects the patriarchal discourse of the Nationalist Party), she endows it with strength and asks Latin America to join the "heroic mission" (83) of liberating Puerto Rico, which she hopes will be the last "wound… / the vile oppressor makes" (87, 89). In the final stanza, she openly declares war on the United States. She proclaims:

> "It is America's Hour!"
>
> Let us start
>
> the crusade of honor.
>
> War to the blood tyrant!
>
> War to the Yankee, (90-94)

Burgos' indictment of U.S. imperialism is obvious, and the poem demonstrates the beginnings of a transnational perspective in Burgos' work, as she draws on Ibero-America's history of revolution throughout the poem to provoke action in Puerto Rico. Juxtaposed with this rhetoric of revolution is a religious discourse that she strategically employs. Words such as "soul," "pray," "cross," "Christian," "redeemed," and "God" are carefully placed within the poem to reinforce the idea she introduces in the seventh stanza that the liberators were inspired by God to fight for "free nations" (74). Moreover, by concluding the poem with the statement that "only / Bolívar / and God / are adored" (100-103) in this land she cements the notion that liberation (and the struggle to achieve it) is ordained by God and therefore justified. As she does in other poems, Burgos employs religious language as a rhetorical strategy to persuade her audience that armed revolt is necessary and even ethical.

In addition to exemplifying militant characteristics (like the ones we see in "Ours" and "Ibero-America") the poem "23rd of September" demonstrates how resistance poetry participates in the re-appropriation of national history. Harlow maintains that First World imperialism disrupts the literary traditions of the Third World and thus interferes with the writing and recording of history. As a result, "the poets, like the guerilla leaders of the resistance movements, consider it necessary to wrest that expropriated historicity back, reappropriate it for themselves in order to reconstruct a new world-historical order" (Harlow 33). Julia de Burgos accomplishes this by chronicling the details of September 23rd (one of the most significant rebellions in Puerto Rican history) and by insisting on this event's ongoing influence. Her poem not only historicizes this uprising and "all those patriots / who died of anger" (5-6) but also propagates the ideologies of justice and

independence that fueled the revolt. She accomplishes this through the repetition of the phrase "23rd of September alive," which begins several lines and all but one stanza in the poem.

In the first stanza, Burgos establishes that the spirit of this resistance to colonialism is present everywhere she looks:

> alive in all the lights of all the stars;
> alive in the subterranean army of suns
> that vibrates in each people sunk in chains;
> alive in the new man who fights on each front
> for freedom of bread and justice of ideas. (7-11)

There is a movement throughout this poem from the universal to the specific and back again. This first stanza does not give the reader any indications of a particular geographical place or nation, so those unfamiliar with the date September 23rd would not immediately recognize the significance this day holds for Puerto Ricans. In these lines, Burgos' language positions the historical date of September 23rd in the realm of the universal, as the fight for "freedom of bread and justice of ideas" could apply to any colonized country. The poem then moves, however, from the general to the more specific. Burgos makes the connection explicit in the second stanza as she shows how this event lives on in the memory and lives of the Puerto Rican people; she begins by noting how this event now spans "two brave centuries" and is still "alive in the great and ferocious Puerto Rican lament / that drips through the lips of the crazy palm trees" (14-15). By personifying the palm trees, Burgos posits that even the natural world of this nation echoes its "battle cry" (3) for freedom, thereby demonstrating the pervasiveness of

this spirit of resistance on the island of Puerto Rico. Moreover, her use of nature imagery in connection with the liberation struggle implies that freedom is (or should be) a fundamental right. She compares the perpetuation of the liberation struggle to the circle of life by claiming that the 23rd of September is "alive in all the dead alive and untiring / that each day are reborn in sacred protests…" (18-19). Here, she honors those who have died fighting for Puerto Rico's independence and elevates the act of protest to the realm of the "sacred," once again drawing on religious rhetoric in order to connect with her audience.

As she chronicles the turbulent and rebellious spirit of the1930s, she demonstrates the interconnectedness of these events with those in the previous century, as El Grito de Lares occurred in 1868. By memorializing specific, well-known individuals who became martyrs and heroes of Puerto Rican independence in the third stanza, Burgos' poem "sustains, within the popular memory, national continuity" (Khouri qtd in Harlow 34). She refers to "Feliu and Suárez Diaz / who initiated the light of the heroic era" (20-21), and to the "unburied blood of Beauchamp and Rosado, / who rose to the ethereal overflowing with strength" (24-25). In the first line, she alludes to Manuel Rafael Suárez Diaz, a young member of the nationalist party who was killed during a protest in San Juan in 1932. Elías Beauchamp and Hiram Rosado (who are the subjects of another poem of hers, "Holy Hour") were also nationalists assassinated by the insular police while in custody and unarmed. They continue to symbolize the oppression of those who spoke out against United States imperialism. Burgos also alludes to the massacre at Rio Piedras (that occurred in 1934) and to the Ponce Massacre, which occurred on Palm Sunday in 1937 and which she describes as "the sacred Sunday of palms and auroras / of

a homeland bloodied but never undone" (26-27). As in the previous stanzas, she reiterates how Puerto Ricans' spirit of resistance and quest for freedom cannot be hampered even by these bloody acts of violence.

In the last stanza, she maintains that El Grito de Lares, or "23rd of September," which declared an independent "Republic of Puerto Rico" remains alive for all of those who, like her, continue to "aspire and dream" of "liberty in my land!" (31, 33). She claims that its legacy lives among her "patriots" in "all the jails" and is "alive in Albizu Campos, solitary among suns / who walks from himself to the world that awaits him" (38, 40-41). As she does in several other poems, she honors Albizu Campos here, Puerto Rico's most prominent political figure of the twentieth-century who dedicated his life to the independence struggle and is considered a national hero. Although she hones in on what this date signifies specifically in Puerto Rican history in this last stanza, she also pulls back out and situates Puerto Rico on a larger world scale. In claiming that the 23rd of September is "howling in heroes all over the earth" (43), she proclaims freedom as a universal right and connects Puerto Rico's fight for independence to anti-colonial struggles throughout the world.

The anti-colonial struggle is the main theme of the poem "Puerto Rico Is in You," which is one of Burgos' sonnets of resistance. She both criticizes and ridicules Puerto Rico's commonwealth status by declaring it an "associated and ridiculous state" that "those [who] are alive with honor refuse" (7, 6) to recognize. She refers to the freedom that "was stolen" (3) when the country was colonized and looks to Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, the founder of the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), to "renew the worth of the Nation's honor" (4). She begins the poem by informing him "resting on you are

millions of hopes" (2) and declares "the voice of independence that we follow with you… / will thunder in the winds with the starred Nation" (5,8). Here, Burgos endows Concepción de Gracia, who represents the "voice" of freedom for the Puerto Rican people, with the strength and intensity of thunder. As she does in many of her poems, she employs nature imagery to advocate for her country's independence and to encourage her fellow citizens to join in the struggle. Concepción de Gracia is an important but at times overlooked figure in Puerto Rican history; at the time it was published, Burgos' poem called attention to one of her contemporaries and the hope he held for Puerto Ricans. As a lawyer, he specialized in civil and constitutional law and he moved to New York City to represent Albizu Campos and the other imprisoned nationalists. In addition to founding the PIP, he presented Puerto Rico's case for decolonization before the United Nations, worked with Vito Marcantonio in defending the civil rights of Hispanics in the U.S., and was also an editor of *La Voz* (Ayala and Bernabe 116,141). Like Burgos, Concepcíon de Gracia participated in the anti-colonial struggle through various activities both on and off the island; his contribution remains part of Puerto Rico's historical record more than fifty years later partly due to Burgos' commemorative poem.

With the line, "Take this message, Puerto Rican and mine:" that begins the last stanza, Burgos' poem calls attention to itself as a political activity that participates in the resistance movement (Harlow 28). She uses her poetry as means of inciting political action and communicates with those on the island that "your free brothers in New York are with you" (12). Here, Burgos reinforces the strong ties between Puerto Ricans on the island and the mainland. Ayala and Bernabe confirm that "interactions between the New York Puerto Rican Left and their island counterparts were common at the time" (141),

particularly for those involved in the independence movement. Like many of her fellow poets and nationalists (who were exiled), Burgos became a diasporic Puerto Rican for the remainder of her life, but she did not abandon her commitment to the independence struggle. Both her poetry and work with *Pueblos Hispanos* are a testament to this. Even near the end of her life, when this poem was written, she continued to advocate for her country's sovereignty. By combining politics with her art, she encourages Puerto Ricans to maintain hope and take up arms, because those on the mainland, like Concepción de Gracia, remain in "combat" (14).

Commemorative Poetry

While the previously discussed poems serve as a call to action, the following poems commemorate specific individuals or events, and thus intervene in the cultural and historical record of the nation. According to Harlow, "the role of poetry in the liberation struggle itself has thus been a crucial one, both as a force for mobilizing a collective response to occupation and domination and as a repository for popular memory and consciousness" (34). In the poems discussed below, Burgos appropriates a Western literary convention – the sonnet form – to advocate resistance to imperialism and Puerto Rican independence. Thus, by issuing declarations for revolution rather than of overflowing emotion (the traditional thematic content of a sonnet), she undermines the colonial art form, and by extension, "dominant forms of ideological and cultural production" (Harlow 29).

As a member of the Nationalist Party who served on the committee to free Albizu Campos, it is not surprising that Burgos wrote several poems in his honor. Her poem "Prayer" is a sonnet dedicated to Albizu Campos and serves as a declaration of her

dedication to the liberation struggle. She addresses Albizu Campos as "Maestro!" in the first line, which translates as "teacher"; this demonstrates the respect she holds for him and that she continues to view him as a mentor, despite the fact that he is imprisoned. Because he is incarcerated, she prays that "God save [his] fervent soul… / from the corruptor gold of the universe" (1, 3); this likely alludes to a payoff he would receive if he agreed to cease participating in independence activities. Burgos hopes that he will not fall prey to this temptation or to other "black and strange passions" (4) but instead continue his "heroic liberating struggle… / to cleanse the homeland of the tyrant" (5, 7). The "tyrant" unmistakably refers to the United States, whom Burgos, Albizu Campos, and other members of the Nationalist Party viewed as an oppressive and illegitimate presence in their country and whose authority many of them refused to recognize.

In keeping with the Italian sonnet form, the first eight lines of Burgos' poem establish a problem: Puerto Rico's continued colonial status and the imprisonment of the Nationalist Party leader, who she fears may become demoralized and abandon the cause. The ninth line, then, marks the "volta" or turn, which represents both a shift in the mood of the poem and a turn in subject, away from Albizu Campos and toward the poet herself, who declares her loyalty to the anti-colonial struggle by telling Albizu Campos,

> I will be at your side, to rip from
>
> the miserable traitor oppressor
>
> his vile blood drop by drop; (9-11)

Here, Burgos utilizes violent language to express her hatred of the colonizer, whom she views as evil; she expresses a desire to literally tear the "oppressor" apart and drain him

of his “blood,” thereby leaving him devoid of life and by extension leaving her island unoccupied.

While still expressing physical force, the last stanza demonstrates a shift from violent to religious language and presents resolution. She believes Albizu Campos and the Nationalists will emerge victorious in their struggle for sovereignty, for she sees him raising a “redemptive sword” (12) and a “conquering hand” (13). In the last line she repeats the idea of redemption by proclaiming, “God save the homeland redeemed!” (14). As we have seen in several of her other poems, Burgos employs religious discourse by calling on God to aid in the liberation struggle. While there is no information confirming that Burgos was an actively religious woman, she did live in a predominantly Catholic country and we know that Albizu Campos’ nationalism “coexisted with traditional Catholic views” (Ayala and Bernabe 105). Thus, her use of religious language reflects the socio-cultural climate of her day and functions as a rhetorical strategy. The end of the poem clearly indicates that Burgos believes in the power of her art to perpetuate the anti-colonial struggle and to serve as an example of a cultural form of resistance to her country’s political and social situation. Burgos not only challenges colonial ideologies through her verse, but also vows to take up arms and join the physical struggle for her country’s freedom.

Albizu Campos becomes the subject of another one of Burgos’ poems, “A Song to Albizu Campos”; the poet memorializes him as a poignant symbol of freedom, for both the Puerto Rican people and the world at large, and so creates an important cultural record. She describes him as a “discoverer,” “conqueror of prisons,” and “liberator of

courses" (6, 8), and credits him with calling worldwide attention to the "soil of Borinquen" (7) and to Puerto Rico's colonial status. She addresses him directly and says,

> Because you left for love of Puerto Rico
> and for love of country, to the eternal you return.
>
> Heart of the instant, nerve and pulse of the world
> that lived in your martyrdom, through you is freed. (20-23)

Here, Burgos endows Albizu Campos with an immortal spirit that will continue to endure because he fought for his country's freedom; moreover, his legacy will live on through his people's collective memory and also through Burgos' poetry. Her repetition of the phrase "Everything in you advances" (10, 14, 18) three times indicates that Burgos views Albizu Campos as a figure of progress, whose influence extends "from Atlanta to the man who fights anywhere" (14). By commemorating his "martyrdom" (line 23) in the name of freedom through a work of art, Burgos continues his mission, thereby positioning her poetry as an integral component of the decolonial struggle.

The poem "Holy Hour" is one of Burgos' sonnets of resistance that serves as both a historical/cultural record and a vehicle of political expression. She dedicates the poem to her subjects, Hirám Rosado & Eliás Beauchamp, "two valiant souls; two stoic martyrs" (3) of the Puerto Rican independence movement. The mid-1930s saw increased clashes between the Nationalists and the authorities, who sought to curb the independence movement by any means possible, including violence. In what became known as the Massacre at Rio Piedras, four nationalists were killed by the insular police in October 1935. To avenge this brutality, Rosado and Beauchamp killed Police Commissioner

Francis Riggs in February1936. They were arrested and subsequently killed at police headquarters in old San Juan (Ayala and Bernabe 110). As "heroic symbols" (1) Rosado and Beauchamp represent both the unjust persecution of hundreds of patriots in Puerto Rican history, and also the valiant commitment of these comrades despite increased violence and the very real possibility of death.

By utilizing the sonnet form to repudiate death, Burgos' verses become poetic protestations. She denounces those who killed Hiram and Elias as "Parricides" (7), defined as those who kill a close relative. In addition, she clarifies that these murderers "were born in our homeland" (6), which adds to the intensity of the offense. This demonstrates the pervasive influence of the colonial power (the United States) as it has infiltrated the local government and caused factions among the Puerto Rican people who are killing one another. Through strong and concrete diction in these lines, Burgos masterfully captures the essence and legacy of colonialism, the subjugation of a people and establishment of a government that turns against its own "brothers" (7).

At the sonnet's turn in the ninth line, the poem shifts from the abstract to the concrete. In the first two stanzas Burgos describes the two men abstractly, with terms, such as "valiant souls" and "two glories" (3, 4); however, in the third stanza, she turns to the corporeal and draws our attention to their physicality, to their "bodies, inert, [that] no longer vibrate" (9). This reminds the reader that the struggle for liberation is not merely ideological, but also physical and often entails the sacrifice and destruction of people's lives. Burgos ends the poem by asserting that the deaths of Hiram and Elias have "shaken" the people and "have signalled the hour of the REVOLUTION" (14). Ending the poem with the word "revolution" and capitalizing it (the only word formatted as

such), emphasizes the act of revolution, for which these two martyrs died and that she repeatedly advocates in her poetry.

"Song to the Hispanic People of America and the World" functions as a historical record, as Burgos highlights how colonialism gave birth to the countries of Latin America and the lasting effects this has had on its people. She begins the poem by acknowledging her intimate connection with the "Hispanic people" of the world:

> It is in you where my song sings, where my voice
>
> began in mountainous screams a free scream
>
> It is in you where my love goes loving: in your petals,
>
> tender flower extended from Bolívar and Spain. (1-4)

The "mountainous screams" where her voice begins to develop and cry out for freedom most likely refers to the mountainous area of Puerto Rico where she was born and also to the mountain towns on the island (such as Lares and Utuado) that have a rich history of insurgency. She connects this history with both the legacy of Simón Bolívar, one of the most important leaders of Spanish America's fight for independence, and with Spain, who initially colonized Puerto Rico. She describes how these Caribbean countries are "a land of blood" (7) that have been shaped by imperialism, which she depicts as an "explosion of horizons" (13). While these were once countries of beauty, described as "America of flowers" (16), they were "converted" to lands of weapons ("lances") and violence with the onset of colonialism. As a result, the "voice" and lives of the Hispanic people have been "wounded" by a "thunder of tyrants and dollars" who still "reign[] / over the spread flight" of these "timid countries" (17-20). Undoubtedly, this "reign" refers to the United States' continued political and economic control over Puerto Rico

(which substantially increased after WWII) and its strong influence in other Caribbean nations. Despite this, she does not view the Hispanic people as weak or demoralized; instead, she characterizes them as powerful, "potent like suns" (21). Moreover, she believes they continue to clamor for freedom as a

> people who livid contemplate
> the dream made blood by Martí's generosity,
> in Puerto Rico, a master beating freedoms
> and a monster in the sanctuary of the Primal City. (25-28)

As she does in "Ibero-America…," Burgos' reference to Jose Martí links Puerto Rico's struggle for self-determination to those throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. She again calls attention to Puerto Rico's colonial status by referring to a "master" (the U.S.) who revokes the people's "freedoms" (line 27) and is supported by a "monster," presumably the governor of the island who lives in San Juan (the "primal city"), and whom many Puerto Ricans view as a puppet of the U.S. government.

Despite these "invading currents," the Hispanic people find a way to "irrigate" or replenish themselves in the "subterranean" (33) and unfathomable conditions in which they live. Burgos applauds how they continue to "launch [their] army in silence" (35) and tells them, "the new man, in you, will vanquish his disgrace" (36). Because the Puerto Rican people continue their struggle for sovereignty, they will overcome any shame imposed upon them by their colonizers. It is significant that Burgos identifies with a Latin and South American tradition of resistance in this poem. She connects Puerto Rico's contemporary fight for independence (that both island and stateside Puerto Ricans participate in) back to Bolívar's struggles in the eighteenth century for Latin

American independence. Thus, Burgos' poem transcends both temporal and geographical borders to show the interconnectedness of all those who fight for self-determination. In these verses, she not only excoriates the legacy of colonialism but also partakes in the decolonial struggle by calling on the "Hispanic People of America" to break their "mythical frontiers" (40) or to rupture the boundaries and limits on their freedom. She dedicates this poem to Juan Antonio Corretjer "on the first anniversary of Pueblos Hispanos." With this dedication, Burgos highlights the intersection of her art with politics, since *Pueblos Hispanos* functioned as a political forum in which the diasporic Puerto Rican community in New York City could continue the mission for a free Puerto Rico. With this "song" Burgos intervenes in the historical record and honors a long tradition of resistance in Hispanic America.

While Burgos alludes to Martí in the previous poems, he becomes the focus in "To José Martí"; as title suggests, her poem functions as a message to the Cuban national hero, from whom she draws strength and hope for the future of her homeland. In addition to calling out to Martí for inspiration, she pays tribute to his struggle for independence and its lasting legacy throughout the Caribbean. She views herself as part of the generation that inherits the anti-colonial struggle he began by opening the poem, "I come from the tender half of your destiny" (1). Moreover, she aligns both Martí and herself with South America when she states that she also comes from the "last starbust of the Andean splendor / that strayed in the shadow, lost from your imprint" (3). Unlike Cuba and other Caribbean countries, Puerto Rico did not achieve independence, and in this way, has "strayed" from Martí's example of revolution. Despite this, Burgos credits Martí with inspiring Puerto Ricans through his expressions of freedom and self-

determination. She pronounces, "I come from an island that trembled at your warble / that made your soul stronger, your call more beautiful" (5-6). Because Puerto Ricans still seek independence, Martí's song for freedom is enhanced and endowed with even greater meaning when it reaches their shore. Moreover, she recognizes how Martí's sacrifice served not only his own country, but that he also "gave blood" for Puerto Rico just as he gave them "a road to follow" (7). To reiterate this point, Burgos ends the stanza with the parenthetical line, "(upon dying for Cuba, you died for her)" (8). Here, she highlights how Martí gave his life in the name of freedom for all oppressed and colonized peoples, a legacy that continues to have an impact in the Latin American world. Burgos elevates Martí to divine status by calling him a "vigorous Antillean God" (11) who possesses an "eternal steady hand" (11). In the final stanza, Burgos claims "Puerto Rico, my homeland, clamors for you on its soil, / and through my wounded voice, conveys itself to you!" (13-14). Here, she makes a strong pronouncement of her poetry as a medium for the liberation struggle. It is through her "wounded voice" that her country communicates with Martí and takes up his legacy, which locates her poetry as site of rebellion.

While it has been said that she "was more interested in social problems" (Agüeros xxvii) than discussions about aesthetics (and her poetry certainly evinces her political inclinations), Burgos was a talented lyricist who wrote poems in a variety of styles, ranging from the Spanish and Italian sonnet to lyrical, epic, commemorative, and denunciatory poems. Juan Pagan maintains that by 1936 Burgos is expressing herself in terms that characterize a poetic discourse that is authentically hers. He describes this poetic voice as "entera y contundente" (139), which translates as strong, robust and forceful, and he identifies it as a voice that rises to denounce the injustices of colonialism

and announce, through song, the redemption of the proletariat (139). As Pagan indicates, Burgos begins cultivating this politically charged poetic voice in the 1930s and she continues to write verses throughout her life that are harshly critical not only of colonialism but also of injustice and oppression throughout the world.

Through her poetry of resistance, then, Burgos advocates for independence, repudiates social and political injustices, and commemorates various national heroes who sacrificed their lives for liberty. She employs a rhetoric of resistance in her poems in order to raise the consciousness of her fellow Puerto Ricans and to provoke her audience into action. As we see in the discussion of the poems above, she writes both within and outside of literary traditions in order to articulate her protest; her appropriation of the sonnet form in her commemorative verses demonstrates the subversive potential of her art, while her use of free verse and unconventional poetic structures in her activist poems reflect her disregard for conventionality. While national independence for her homeland was a large concern throughout her lifetime, she was an advocate for liberty, or freedom from restriction, in its most general and widespread sense. She sought liberation from a variety of boundaries she encountered in life, including those of gender norms and expectations, societal and class conventions, literary traditions, and even those between the life and death. As a result, her poetry engages a variety of themes and utilizes multiple forms, but one element remains constant: her political consciousness and spirit of resistance.

CHAPTER IV

“THE SUBVERSIVE VERB”: CLEMENTE SOTO VÉLEZ’S REVOLUTIONARY POETICS

“the hero / is / the blossom
scenting
the guerilla band with guerilla poetry”

-Soto Vélez, “#2” (*The Promised Land*)

In poem “#2” from his 1979 collection, *The Promised Land*, Clemente Soto Vélez elevates the poet to the status of “hero” who serves a crucial function in the “guerilla band,” and therefore, the fight for justice, a central theme throughout his work. The image of a blossom diffusing its scent juxtaposed with war imagery illustrates the complexity of Soto Vélez’s poetry, which thrives on “duality and contradiction” and contains “a strong political sensibility” (Espada and Pérez-Bustillo 9, 7). Soto Vélez co-founded an avant-garde literary movement in Puerto Rico, *La Atalaya de los Dioses* (The Watchtower of the Gods), which was influenced by European surrealism and other Latin American vanguard movements that “sought an active reengagement between art and experience,” as well as the “rehumanization of art” (Unruh 21). Josefina Rivera de Alvarez explains that *Atalayismo* was “innovative, experimental, devoted to fragmentation and reconstruction of language” (qtd in Espada and Pérez-Bustillo 7) and insisted on novel ideological perspectives. All of these characteristics are evident in the poetry of Soto Vélez, whose linguistic experimentation combined with socialist ideology results in a syncretic poetic practice that enacts the liberation for which he advocates. Through the use of personification, anaphora, and most importantly, juxtaposition, his poetry functions as a dialectical process that enables him to imagine new realities and to foster transformation.

While Soto Vélez's leading role in the Puerto Rican independence movement, his incarceration, and eventual exile to New York City inform his work, his poetry does not strictly, or even explicitly, address these sociopolitical events. In fact, most of his verses engage concepts such as oppression, imprisonment, liberation, and justice in much more abstract terms, and he advocates freedom from oppression in all of its forms – political, social, economic, linguistic, intellectual, and even spiritual. George Yudice maintains that Soto Vélez's poetry is "defined by anti-imperialism," which "is the link between atalayismo and the nationalist independentista project with which he progressively becomes more involved" (b9, f7); I would extend this claim to argue that Soto Velez's poetic project exemplifies a consciousness of resistance and transcendence while pronouncing a cosmic vision of liberation. In this way, Soto Vélez stands as a global, rather than a specifically Puerto Rican or Latin American, revolutionary, who expresses his sociopolitical perspective through metaphysical images and concepts.

From Island to Diaspora: Soto Vélez's Ceaseless Struggle for Independence

In his unpublished biographical notes[11], written in both English and Spanish, Clemente Soto Vélez identifies himself as a "poet, politician, journalist, and philosopher" who was born "on January 4, 1905, in Lares, a town in the mountains of Puerto Rico where the first Republic of Puerto Rico was declared on September 23, 1868" ("Who Is" 1). Since this latter fact is repeatedly mentioned, it clearly holds deep significance for him, and Lares even appears as a subject in several of his poems, including poem "#4"

[11] The Clemente Soto Vélez archives at Hunter College contain multiple, undated biographical notes, some of which are handwritten and others typed. The poet refers to himself in the third, rather than the first, person; however, the manuscripts suggest that they were written by Soto Vélez himself, perhaps for specific conferences or symposiums where a speaker would need to introduce the poet. Most of the manuscripts provide a brief overview of his life and work up to the 1980s.

from *The Wooden Horse* and poem "#65" from *The Promised Land*. While this independent republic only lasted for twenty-four hours, the uprising (known as El Grito de Lares) had a lasting impact on the Puerto Rican nation. It is not only commemorated with anniversary celebrations on the island but also serves as a symbol of Puerto Rican resistance (Murillo 21). Soto Vélez came of age at a time when many members of his community vividly remembered the uprising of 1868, which undoubtedly influenced his sensibility and perhaps even his commitment to fight for an independent Puerto Rico. Moreover, according to Martín Espada, the time and place of his birth situates Soto Vélez as a bridge figure, who "provides a link with more than a century of Puerto Rican resistance to first Spanish and then U.S. colonial rule, a resistance he came to personify" (*The Blood* 7).

Soto Vélez first addressed important sociopolitical issues in journalistic form, serving as editor for the bilingual newspaper *El Tiempo* in 1928 and then for the weekly newspaper of the Nationalist Party, *Armas* (*Weapons*). He maintains that he was fired as editor of *El Tiempo* "after writing a front-page editorial urging the members of La Asociación de Productores de Azúcar [The Association of Sugar Producers] to pay their taxes to the public treasury" ("Who Is" 2). In addition to serving as editor of *Armas*, Soto Vélez became part of the governing body of the Nationalist Party, and like his fellow comrades, he actively engaged in the struggle for Puerto Rican independence in the 1930s. He participated in the 1932 take-over of the Capitol building in San Juan and the sugar strike in Guayama in 1934, for which he was imprisoned. The militant discourse and violent acts of the Nationalist Party brought them under the surveillance of the United States government, which repeatedly repressed the liberation movement and

imprisoned its members. After the death of Police Commissioner Francis Riggs in 1936, Soto Vélez (along with Albizu Campos and seven other Nationalists) was convicted of seditious conspiracy and imprisoned in the United States until 1942. The loss of freedom he experienced at this time had a profound effect on him and is expressed in his poetry years later.

Since he was forbidden to return to Puerto Rico upon his release from the Atlanta penitentiary in 1942, Soto Vélez migrated to New York City and took up various causes associated with the Puerto Rican people (both on the island and in the diaspora). He founded and directed the Puerto Rican Merchants' Association for small shopkeepers from 1942 to the 1970s, and he founded the *Club Cultural del Bronx* as well as the Puerto Rican center *Casa Borinquen*. Along with poets Juan Antonio Corretjer and Julia de Burgos, he edited and wrote for the political and literary weekly paper *Pueblos Hispanos* (*Hispanic People*) in the 1940s; he also wrote for *Liberacion* from 1946-1949 and helped establish the magazine *La Voz de Puerto Rico en Estados Unidos* (*The Voice of Puerto Rico in the United States*) in the 1950s (Hernández-Banuchi 11). As an outspoken activist, he also became an organizer for Congressman Vito Marcantonio and the American Labor party (10). As Espada notes, Soto Vélez "became the bridge between the independence movement in Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican community in the U.S. mainland" (Espada "Lover" 17). The 1950s were his most prolific period as a poet, during which he published *Abrazo interno* (*Internal Embrace*) in 1954, *Arboles* (*Trees*) in 1955, and *Caballo de palo* (*The Wooden Horse*) in 1959. In 1979, the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña published *La tierra prometida* (*The Promised Land*) and in 1989

they also published "his *Obra Poética*, the collected writings from his previous five books" (Espada and Pérez-Bustillo 9).

Despite being called "one of the greatest poets of his generation" (Maldonado-Denis), Soto Vélez's poetry remains relatively unknown in the United States outside of the Puerto Rican literary community. One of the main reasons for this has to do with the fact that most of his poetry, aside from the seventeen selections collected in *The Blood That Keeps Singing*, has yet to be translated into English. However, another reason lies in the fact that the more radical Puerto Rican writers from this generation, including Soto Vélez, Graciany Miranda, and Emilio R. Delgado, have been left out of most narratives of the "*la generacion del trienta*" (generation of the thirties) and, thus, remain marginalized in the critical scholarship (Ayala and Bernabe 132-133). One of the purposes of this chapter, as with the previous one on Julia de Burgos, is to provide more critical analysis (in English) of this remarkable poet's work.

While there is little scholarship in English regarding Soto Vélez's poetry, the archives at Hunter College reveal that his work has been frequently discussed among Latin American scholars in both Puerto Rico and the United States. In 1990, the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras held a symposium on his work, during which scholars in various fields, such as Political Science and Spanish, presented papers that examine author's poetry and commitment to social issues. Although the archives only contain abstracts of the papers presented (which were later published in Spanish), they provide some indication of how Soto Vélez's poetry has been analyzed over the years. In his paper, "The historical background of the poetry of Clemente Soto Vélez," Manuel Maldonado-Denis identifies Soto Vélez as "the poetic spokesman for the emerging …

forces [of] rebellion and protest that coalesced in the Puerto Rican Nationalist Movement"; as his title suggests, he situates the poet's work within the historical context that shapes it and praises his "steadfast devotion to the cause of freedom and social justice" (b9, f7) exemplified in both his poetry and social activism. Alberto Sandoval presented a paper entitled "Escalio and Abrazo interno: In Search of a Technique in order to Construct a Dialectical, Poetic Image." In his abstract, Sandoval posits that Soto Vélez's use of "antithesis, binary oppositions, redefinition of the poetic sign, de-signification of the poetic sign in order to affirm the negation of meaning, the employ of anaphora to produce a process of continuous change … make possible the linguistic representation of a dialectical, poetic image" (b9, f7) in the author's first two works, *Escalio* and *Abrazo Interno*. In "The search for a Revolutionary Subject in Clemente Soto Velez's Atalayista Period," George Yudice seeks to demonstrate the "revolutionary anti-imperialist subject" Soto Vélez creates in *Escalio*, where "self-knowledge and self consciousness … leads to autonomy, freedom" (b9, f7). This notion of a "revolutionary, anti-imperialist subject" is important, as it continues to appear in Soto Vélez's later poetry, most specifically in *The Promised Land*. Leo F. Cabranes-Grant also picks up on the theme of autonomy in Soto Vélez's poetic work, which he believes "manifests itself as an expression of … freedom … and the importance of the creative act in the life of mankind" (b9, f7). In a more recent article, "'A Mountain / in my pocket': The Affective Spatial Imagination in Post-1952 Puerto Rican Poetry," Michael Dowdy examines the negotiation of spaces and identities in what he terms "Post-1952" Puerto Rican poetry (the year signaling when Puerto Rico became a Commonwealth or Free Associated State), which he believes "comprises a range of overlapping yet distinctive poetic

practices that share a flexible, affective spatial imagination that poeticizes a *felt* knowledge of geographical and sociopolitical space" (41). In the article, he briefly touches on Soto Vélez's poetry, which he describes as "surreal, abstract, and prophetic" and where "space and place thus become 'subject to' the poet's imagination" (59). He argues that, unlike the first two poetic practices he examines, in which "the affective spatial imagination exists in specific—though hybrid and fluid—transnational spaces," Soto Vélez's "poetic project aspires to a sensibility of space and place that exceeds the narrowly material, modeling an affective spatial consciousness of oppression, resistance, and redemption" (59).

Vanguard Politics and Poetics: *Atalayismo* and The Nationalist Party

Soto Vélez's ethos of resistance has strong seeds in the vanguard literary movement that he co-founded in 1928 with Graciany Miranda Archilla and Alfredo Margenat. Again, *Atalayismo* coincided with other avant-garde movements of the era, such as those in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, and Peru. Vicky Unruh explains that in Latin America writers sought to "challenge and redefine the nature and purpose of art" (2) and that "vanguardists themselves often conceptualized art and intellectual life as action or doing. The pervasive activist spirit that characterized much of this literary work was consonant with the historical context in which the vanguards emerged" (4). Nelson Osorio describes this era as containing an "antioligarchic spirit" (qtd in Unruh 4), on which Unruh elaborates:

> The years from the late teens through the early 1930s constituted an epoch of contentious encounters manifesting the changing alliances that accompany shifting economic, social, and political conditions. Latin American nations

> experienced the impact of World War I era economic changes, of political hopes generated by the Russian revolution and international workers' movements, and of the pervasive postwar disillusionment with European culture. (4)

In Puerto Rico, the early decades of the twentieth century were equally tumultuous as "the crisis of the capitalist system … went hand in hand with the crisis of the colonial system in Puerto Rican society" (Maldonado-Denis).[12] A new generation of politically active writers responded to these crises with a wave of avant-garde literary movements that sought social change and also "shared a rejection of a stifling, stagnant Puerto Rican literary scene and a desire to shock it out of lethargy" (Ayala and Bernabe 90). According to Soto Vélez, *Atalayismo* "proposed the dissolution, by means of the poetic expression, of the academism of Puerto Rican literature of the time" ("Who Is" 1); Espada adds that it "became a major literary force in Puerto Rico … [and] coincided with the rise of the militant Nationalist Party, a mass movement for independence as powerful as any in Puerto Rican history" (*The Blood* 7). While scant scholarship in English exists that addresses this poetic movement, a few texts dealing more broadly with Caribbean or Latin American literature briefly give it mention. In *Latin American Vanguards*, Vicky Unruh provides a short overview of Puerto Rico's avant-garde movements, which were "marked by a comparable intensification of autochtonist concerns" (19) due to a "renewed advocacy of autonomy or independence and for sustained manifestations of nationalism in politics and intellectual life" (19). She offers a general description of Puerto Rico's vanguardist activity:

[12] See chapter two for a summary of significant social, economic, and politic events of these decades.

> as a whole…[it] was characterized by the predominance of poetry and linguistic experiment, by an Americanist continental orientation, by a gradually emerging focus on national and Antillean cultural motifs, and by the island's first literary affirmations of West African language and culture as significant cultural presences. (19)

Of the various "isms" of the period, including *diepalismo*, *euforismo*, and *noísmo*, Unruh asserts that *Atalayismo* was "probably the most enduring through its long-term impact on Puerto Rican poetry" (19). In *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: Hispanic and Francophone Regions*, Albert James Arnold, Julio Rodríguez-Luis, and J. Michael Dash note that *Atalayismo* presented "thematic innovation, new ideological perspectives, and radical changes in form and content" while also insisting upon "constant experimentation and deliberately rebel[ling] against the remains of *modernista* and transcendental rhetoric" (229). The poets associated with this movement are often characterized as social poets who not only adopted experimentalist techniques but also addressed the social concerns of their time. Rafael Catalá suggests, "that one of the movement's goals was to establish an innovative relationship (*entroncar*) between poetics and politics while also following Jose Martí's, Eugenio Maria de Hostos's, and Ramón Emeterio Betances's objectives to gain cultural and political independence from Europe and the U.S." (qtd in Dowdy 42). When read through the sociohistorical lens of Puerto Rico, the juxtapositions in Soto Vélez's poems could be said to mirror the conflict over the island's ongoing colonial status and its contentious and paradoxical relationship with the United States.

Although Soto Vélez did not begin publishing his poetry until the 1950s, the ideologies and aesthetics of *Atalayismo* remained with him and find expression in nearly all of his verses. In contrast to the style of Julia de Burgos, as well as that of several of his contemporaries, Soto Vélez engages ideas and themes more abstractly, and the influence of his experimentation with form can be seen in the work of some of his successors, most notably that of Naomi Ayala. His lack of punctuation, short lines, and reconstruction of language (he even invented his own phonetic alphabet) parallel his quest for change in society; as Espada explains, "for the poet, the promised land was not only an independent Puerto Rico, but a socialist society" ("Lover" 18). A speech he gave in 1987 for the First Latino Arts and Humanities Conference in Massachusetts solidifies several of the ideologies that repeatedly surface in his poetry of the preceding decades, particularly the notion of overthrowing intellectual oppression. Soto Vélez reiterates his conviction that "there is only one humanity," encourages his audience to form "an army of ideas to transform those who do not progress, and must progress" (*The Blood* 119), and explains that

> progress is simply that which we carry inside ourselves. We progress because nature compels us to, and if not, we die…every idea that is not progressive or is backward dies immediately. It has no validity. But an idea that is not backward persists and perseveres…we overcome the enemy simply with the force of our ideas, and I refer to ignorance as our enemy, not to armies governed by men. (121)

As articulated here, and in the poetry examined below, Soto Vélez strongly believed in the interconnectedness of humanity and its capacity for progress, and he championed knowledge as a tool for resistance.

Early work: *Fallow Land* and *Internal Embrace*

Remarkably, Soto Vélez's first book, *Escalio* (*Fallow Land*), was published in 1937 while he was still incarcerated; he describes it as a collection of "philosophical ideas in the form of a dialogue between Knowledge and Creation" ("Who Is" 1), and Rafael Catalá asserts that it draws on "principles from Theosophy and transforms them into an autochthonous literary expression" (b9, f7). According to Hernández-Banuchi, the dialogues between these two characters suggest "a universal revolution, where self-knowledge and self-consciousness leads mankind to self-autonomy and freedom" (Hernández-Banuchi 7). In a short excerpt from this collection, titled "Horizons," Soto Vélez declares imperialism "a joke made out of ignorance" and "the denial of freedom" (15). He notes how his book, which he views as something that should uphold "the just and the truthful," has traveled "through all the whirlwinds of persecution" and risks being "absorbed by imperialist ambition" (15). The poet explains how he has been "arrested by imperialism" and states the irony of having "imprisonment, as well as exile, imposed upon him" (15) while writing about revolution. As a text that is written and published during both an active liberation struggle and the author's imprisonment, it most certainly "calls attention to itself … as a political and politicized activity" (Harlow 28). Although he might seem to be stating the obvious, this early text touches on several concepts, such as imperialism, ignorance, imagination, persecution, revolution, and freedom that will appear throughout Soto Vélez's poetic career.

"The Achieved Emotion" from the 1954 collection *Internal Embrace*, offers an early glimpse of Soto Vélez's grand vision of liberation and the dialectical processes at work in his poetry. Throughout his lines he presents conflicting images and ideas, or "binary oppositions" (Sandoval); this use of juxtaposition allows for a dialectic between such things as the earth and the sky or reason and emotion that he combines in order to create synthesis and, ultimately, transformation. The poet also employs personification, alliteration, and light imagery to emphasize the vital role of knowledge in the liberation struggle and to exalt its importance in achieving ultimate transcendence. The first stanza overflows with exuberance and philosophical concepts, as the poet outlines the central ideas – knowledge, peace, and liberation – that he extrapolates on in greater detail throughout the poem. He personifies the social movements he believes will create social justice and lead to transcendence for "each child, each woman, each man" (16):

> New social forces wrap their waists
> with jubilant horizons, leaping over the palisades
> of bitterness, to hoist the flag of peace, over grief's summit,
> like the universal heart
> – revolutionary symbol of human liberation –
> unfurling to the orange winds of reason. (1-6)

Soto Vélez's use of the words "jubilant," "leaping," and "hoist" lends a confident and triumphant tone to this first stanza and enables him to emphasize the notion that love overcomes grief and that reason leads to liberation. While Puerto Rico is not explicitly mentioned in the poem, the "new social forces" could allude to the Nationalist Movement in Puerto Rico, in which Soto Vélez actively participated, or it could allude to an

emerging socialist ideology within the party. Even though the Nationalist Party lost is prominence after the 1950s, the poet remained a socialist throughout his life and believed that socialism was the only solution for the countries of Latin America (Bliss, P). For Soto Vélez, liberation does not merely entail an independent Puerto Rico, but rather "human liberation" (5) on a grand scale. While Soto Vélez physically struggled for political and economic freedom for Puerto Rico, he also fought for intellectual and spiritual liberation in his verses and speeches. Throughout the poem, he emphasizes that liberation only flourishes with the "unity of thought, / action and word" (12-13), which echoes the "activist" spirit that was central to *Atalayismo* and other vanguard movements of the time.

By proclaiming what the "fearful are forbidden" (30) in stanzas three through seven, the poet implies the actions and rewards of those brave enough to fight for liberation. It is primarily through negation, then, that Soto Vélez defines the revolutionary, whom he characterizes as courageous and enlightened. In stanza four the poet proclaims that the fearful cannot "discover love" (30), which

> …………transforms today into the human embrace of loving
>
> peoples,
>
> who searched many years
>
> for what burned within their bowels, (32-35)

Soto Vélez's placement of the word "peoples" on its own line, amidst abstract concepts such as "love" and "knowledge" (30, 36), allows him to call attention to the humanity of the struggle while also emphasizing that numerous people throughout the world, including Puerto Ricans, continue to yearn and struggle for autonomy. For their

"rebellious audacity" (40) and enduring "will" and "faith" (8, 9) those who seek "knowledge" (36) will be "illuminated by the internal light of their evolution" (37). This notion of transcendence through knowledge is a key idea in the poem and is mentioned in nearly every stanza, often through the use of light imagery. For example, in stanza three the poet asserts that the brave, not the fearful, will experience a

> silent awakening of the spirit –
>
> the match with which matter lights the lamp of space – (24-25)

In addition to the light imagery evoked by the match and the lamp, Soto Vélez personifies matter and uses words like "spirit," "space," "matter," and "lights" that draw attention to the metaphysical nature of this transformation; all these techniques combine to make the concept of enlightenment in these two lines resonate throughout the poem.

Soto Vélez's poem relies on a dialectic between the abstract and the concrete in order to convey the notion that both thought and action are necessary in order to create change and achieve transcendence, or the "achieved emotion" (56). The speaker highlights this very process at work in stanza five, where he acknowledges the immensity of the "word[]," which is "full of creative actions in confrontation, / clashing whirlpools of contrary motion" (44-45). According to Soto Vélez, poetry not only sustains contradiction but can also harness that tension into something "new" (42). Moreover, his unusual pairings, such as "the flowering tree of theory" (21) encourage the reader to reconsider their paradigms for understanding the world and their experiences in it. Since theory belongs to realm of the abstract, describing it in terms of something tangible, like a tree that produces flowers, transforms the concept and allows readers to think about it in a different way. In the end, "The Achieved Emotion" demonstrates the egalitarian vision

behind all of Soto Vélez's poetry and illustrates his conviction that those who "test the incandescent bravery / of ideas" (49-50) or seek knowledge and deeper self-awareness are truly rebellious and will, thus, experience "the fertile culture of…liberation" (11).

The Wooden Horse

It is Soto Vélez's third collection of poetry, *Caballo de Palo* (*The Wooden Horse*), that establishes his literary reputation; nearly every poem begins with the line "I came to know him,"[13] where the poet refers to himself in the third person (Espada "Lover" 16). According to Alberto Hernández-Banuchi, in this collection, Soto Vélez "creates a universal being that sets out on a fantastic imaginary voyage from the Lares countryside in Puerto Rico and around the world; it is the child-poet in his quest for freedom among his fellow men and women" (13-14). In the prologue to the collection, Pedro Seneriz asserts that within this "Quixotic pilgrimage, the poet runs through the full gamut of thematic, the mystery of life, the creation of poetry, the liberation of the proletariat, the kingdom of liberty, human integrity…" (qtd in Hernández-Banuchi 12). Poem "#4" exemplifies this "pilgrimage," as Soto Vélez employs repetition, personification, and juxtaposition to create a poem that enacts a continual process of discovery and transformation. The poem is divided into seventeen stanzas that each begin with the line "I came to know him," followed by a progressive tense verb; this prominent repetition evokes an oral tradition practiced by his ancestors, and in some

[13] In his essay "The Lover of a Subversive is Also a Subversive" Espada revised this translation to "I met him"; however, I use the original translation in this chapter since it is the one used throughout *The Blood that Keeps Singing*.

ways, the poem also revives the Taíno spirit of resistance.[14] Soto Vélez structures the poem so the stanzas alternate between those with concrete images, such as "jubilant boys and girls" (16) who play "a singsong game shoeless in the fountains" (15) in stanza two, to ones with more abstract or metaphysical ideas, such as "the solitude of the flesh hoisting itself / onto its star" (26-27) in stanza three. In addition, the continuous alternation of short and long lines, coupled with a verb tense that indicates ongoing action, further emphasizes a sense of movement. These formal techniques, then, reinforce the dialectical processes at work in the poem and correspond to the overall theme of transformation.

Soto Vélez's recurring use of nature imagery and personification of the natural world stand out as some of the most striking characteristics of poem "#4," and they demonstrate his belief in humanity's interdependence with the earth, which he views as a sacred connection.[15] The land becomes alive and even possesses a consciousness of its own, as elements of the natural world become characters in nearly every stanza. Images such as "quivering moons / that run" (4-5), a "sunflower that sings" (24), "destitute dawns that carry / the sorrowful light of neglect / in their loins:" (81-83), "the sleeping / sun" (122-123), and "a feeling stone" (136) reinforce the ways in which the environment and humanity mirror one another; they also indicate the poet's view of the earth as a living entity that deserves the reader's attention and from which they can learn valuable lessons. For instance, the speaker depicts "a cornfield that raises / the voice of its

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[14] See Stan Steiner's book, *The Islands*, for a more detailed discussion of the various instances in the sixteenth century in which the Taínos revolted against the Spanish conquistadores and refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of the king

[15] Several of the phrases the poet uses to describe natural phenomena such as "keeping vigil / over the beheaded bay" (29-30), "giving testimony of grace at nightfall" (34), "giving flight / to faith over a restless sea-swell of rainbows" (50-51), and "lordly pulsation of anxious heights" (135) have spiritual and/or religious connotations.

growing stalks" (58-59) and an "insurrection of sunflowers" (47), suggesting that people can learn about resistance by observing it at work in nature. In stanza eleven, the speaker "resign[s]" his "brilliance" (91, 92) or gives himself over to the earth and listens

> to the vigilant stones
>
> - rocky contemplative spirits,
>
> truths of mud,
>
> luminous ribs
>
> that cause
>
> the sprouting of the expression that transforms
>
> its being at each step. (93-99)

The poet's personification here of rocks as thoughtful spirits and the soil as a source of truth casts the earth as a life force, teacher, and wellspring of knowledge. In the logic of the stanza (and the poem as a whole), observing and giving oneself over to the land leads to emotional growth and progress.

In combination with nature imagery, Soto Vélez also expresses themes of renewal and transformation through layers of references to light. He begins the poem:

> I came to know him
>
> gathering
>
> early mornings of Lares lost
>
> in the brownskinned magic of quivering moons
>
> that run
>
> bearing a star on their shoulders,
>
> rejuvenated in dreams,

like a mythic goddess of fireflies. (1-8)

"Early mornings" suggest the first light of day, or sunrise, which signifies regeneration and possibility, and the speaker assigns importance to this ritual of welcoming the beginning of the day. While the moon chiefly appears at night and would seem to be juxtaposed with sunrise, the moon is visible because of reflected light from the sun and also gives off a fair amount of light itself. In addition, the poet personifies the moon as running and carrying a "star" on its shoulder; since stars also provide light in the night sky, this image intensifies the motif of illumination, and its attendant associations with truth that is already prominent throughout the stanza. Furthermore, the moon symbolizes the passage of time, as it repeatedly passes through several phases from new moon to full moon and back again. Thus, Soto Vélez employs the moon as a metaphor for light and also as a symbol of change.

Throughout the poem, an examination of the natural world allows the speaker to contemplate earthly existence as well as concepts that are beyond the earthly realm. For example, his observation of neglect of the earth, described as "destitute dawns" (81) full of "cold darkness," prompts thoughts of immortality or "the extinction of … death" (88), and his experience with "a sunflower that sings" (24) leads him to contemplate the abstract concept of loneliness or " the solitude of the flesh hoisting itself / onto its star" (26-27). The juxtaposition of the concrete and the abstract here also corresponds to the arrangement of the earthly ("sunflower") and the heavenly ("star") alongside each other (a pattern also repeated throughout the poem), thereby indicating the way in which the poet views them as interconnected or part of a cycle. For Soto Vélez, an acute

examination of nature accompanies, or in some cases, elicits existential thought, and an understanding of its cycles leads to greater self-awareness.

Soto Vélez's attitude of reverence for, rather than mastery over, the earth is rooted in an understanding of the Taíno worldview, which also holds significance in the poem. Several references early on, particularly the lines "gathering / early mornings of Lares lost" (2-3) in the first stanza, locate the emotional landscape of the poem in Puerto Rico. For the first time in the collection (but not the last) Soto Vélez refers to his hometown; once again, Lares holds great significance, personally for Soto Vélez, and collectively for the Puerto Rican nation, and it becomes clear that the speaker initially comes "to know" himself by reconnecting with both the physical landscape and the history of his homeland. This entails "listening / to Indian ceremonies of drums / mounted on memories of Taíno horses" (10-12) and "milking / goats of historical memory / like musing waves of Taíno cheekbones" (37-39). The poet's depiction of "milking goats" suggests he must actively work to keep his people's history alive and his comparison of "historical memory" to "musing waves" indicates his view of memory as an ongoing and intentional process. These lines also demonstrate one way in which Soto Vélez's poem partakes in the "imaginative remaking of both space – the once expropriated topography – and time – the collective historical experience of that place" (Ramazani 155), and thereby enacts cultural decolonization. By reincorporating the indigenous or "brownskinned" people into the island's history and paying homage to their cultural practices in his verses, Soto Vélez revives and perpetuates a Taíno consciousness. He underscores their presence through his depiction of the Taíno as "still walking / among the stars with feet on the earth" (42-43). This line also evokes the Taíno belief that the

"spirits of the dead remained in their bones" (Figueroa), which corresponds to their practice of using the bones of their ancestors to make idols that represented deities. Moreover, this juxtaposition of being present in both the heavens and on the earth, in the past and in the present, demonstrates the poet's adoption of an indigenous perspective, in which time is cyclical (in keeping with the cycles of the earth) and opposing ideas come together to create synthesis. Finally, the Taíno are not merely present, but are depicted as thriving, for Soto Vélez uses words such as "resonant" and "blooming" (41) to describe them.

Soto Vélez's intertwining of earthly images and philosophical ideas demonstrates the power of the imagination, to which he draws explicit attention in stanza twelve; these lines also contain the metaphor that gives this collection its title. He writes:

> I came to know him
> submerging
> his wooden horse in the blackest water,
> where the imagination gleams
> like integrity that falls
> raising itself up
> to its ingenuous forehead,
> where death bends
> the shadow of its mirror. (100-108)

Soto Vélez highlights various concepts in this stanza, including mortality, the power of the subconscious, and the interplay between reality and the imagination. The words "integrity" and "ingenuous" denote honesty and truth, and when coupled with

"forehead," which evokes the mind, suggest logical thoughts based on experience; "imagination," on the other hand, signifies the semblance of reality or the ability to create new ideas, particularly of things never experienced or seen. For the poet, though, the imagination, which "gleams" or gives off light, does not stand in opposition to truth, but instead is inextricable from it. Moreover, Soto Vélez suggests that it is the imagination that will sustain him in the "blackest water," a metaphor here for an oppressive or difficult situation.

The act of submerging one's wooden horse in the mud would seem to signify surrender; however, within the context of the stanza, it actually represents the opposite. Soto Vélez's placement of the words "falls" and "raising" one line after another, so that they are read in sequence, is crucial to this reading, as it gives the stanza a sense of motion and allows the reader to move up and down, both physically and emotionally, with the speaker. This technique also mimics the motion of the wooden horse bobbing up and down in the mud, fighting to stay upright ("raising itself up") even as forces of nature attempt to pull it downward. Thus, the image of struggled movement invoked by the wooden horse in the black water is a metaphor for resistance[16]. The final two lines of the stanza underscore this notion, as death (personified) struggles against itself. Since a mirror portrays an opposite image, the mirror of death would be life; thus, we could re-read the last two lines of stanza twelve as "death bends the shadow of life," which in the context of the poem, reinforces the theme of resistance and introduces the struggle

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[16] In literary history, the wooden horse also serves as a reference to the Trojan horse in Virgil's *The Aeneid* and symbolizes something that appears harmless but is in fact subversive. In Virgil's epic poem, the Greeks build a wooden horse that conceals Greek soldiers inside and they trick the Trojans into wheeling the horse into the city as a trophy; after nightfall, the Greek soldiers emerge from the horse and take control of the city of Troy, ultimately ending the Trojan war (http://www.stanford.edu/~plomio/history.html#anchor204279)

between death and life. In the stanzas that follow, this battle continues to play out with depictions such as “the tongue / learns to give birth” (116-117), “emerging / out of the dark husk that falls” (120-121), and “perishing / in his untouched flight” (133-134). Ultimately, Soto Vélez reminds us that existence entails change as well as a constant cycle of life and death, where “the new / begins in what has ended” (150-151). Throughout poem “#4” Soto Vélez resurrects a Taíno consciousness, which understands the earth as simultaneously creative and destructive and considers opposing forces necessary to achieve both synthesis and transformation (Rouse). Ramazani asserts that poetry “helps remind us that decolonization is not only a political and military process but also an imaginative one – an enunciation of new possibilities and collectivities, new names and identities, new structures of thought and feeling” (162). Soto Vélez’s use of opposing images and ideas, as well as his personification of nature, enables readers to reconsider their static perceptions of the world and encourages them to imagine new realities.

In this new reality and in poem “#17,” liberation reigns over oppression. Soto Vélez’s prominent repetition, specifically of the words “alone,” “suffer,” and “comrades,” lends the poem a militant tone, as he implores his fellow “comrades” of “love…labor…[and] the world” (22, 24, 26) to love “liberation[]” (4) and advocate for “her” even if they may “suffer” as a result. He admonishes “Those who have mocked / liberation’s reign” (3-4), referring to those who do not believe in or fight for independence, and proclaims they will “suffer / greatly” (6-7). While he delineates a difference between the adversaries and advocates of liberation throughout the poem, he powerfully conveys the fact that without freedom everyone suffers, whether “in

smallness" or "in immensity" (19, 21). Like most of his poems, this one abounds with juxtapositions and reversals that highlight the complicated nature of colonialism (particularly in the case of Puerto Rico). Within a few lines of each other, he places the words "solitude," "multitudes," "alone," "smallness," and immensity," thereby demonstrating the disparate attitudes and yet parallel situation of colonized peoples. Those who scoff at the idea of autonomy may

> not suffer
> from solitude alone with her,
> but suffer
> in multitudes alone with her (10-13).

The initial two of these four lines could be a reference to the sense of isolation political activists may endure if imprisoned, which Soto Vélez experienced first-hand; they also hark back to the existential poem "Solitude," which concludes the poet's first collection, *Fallow Land*. That poem reads as a deep introspection regarding isolation and the meaning of existence, and
relies on repetition and alliteration to emphasize its philosophical perspective:

> To think, alone, to think
> as all the gathered forces
> of creation think,
> and, so alone, alone,
> alone, to listen searching
> for the original reason
> that vibrates in the light (8-14)

Although the speaker emphasizes his solitariness through the repetition of the word "alone" (as he does in "#17"), he also draws attention to this shared experience ("gathered forces") of philosophical inquiry and the search for meaning that all of "creation" undergoes. The poem demonstrates how isolation can be a process of discovery ("searching") and enlightenment (implied by the reference to "light"), and therefore, could be considered something to celebrate rather than mourn. The poet highlights the act of singing "alone" in stanza three and concludes the poem in stanza four by proclaiming "Solitude, Solitude, / heart of life!" (27-28). In Soto Vélez's worldview, the state of being alone seems to be at the center of the human experience, and once again, he welcomes it as necessary to "balance[] all / within the living force" (24-25).

Just as he reflects on one's experience as both an individual and part of a larger community in "Solitude," he turns the subject back to the general population in "#17," or to the "multitudes," whose lives are detrimentally affected by colonialism. Within four lines, then, Soto Vélez moves from the individual to the communal effects of colonialism, thereby highlighting their interconnectedness. Because Soto Vélez does not explicitly mention Puerto Rico, the poem also stands as a decree for liberation from oppression wherever and in whatever form it exists. He supported anti-colonial and labor struggles around the globe, believing that all people are "part of this familial collectivity" (*The Blood* 119). In his 1987 speech in Massachusetts, he provides a vivid example to remind the audience that the suffering of one is the suffering of all: "when…the police in Chile have split open the head of one our brothers, I suffer. I suffer; it hurts me in the soul. Be it in New York, or in California, or in Nicaragua, or in El Salvador, or wherever it may

be. This hurts me because there is only one humanity. There are not two. And I am part of that humanity" (119). Soto Vélez's yearning for complete human liberation finds even stronger expression in *The Promised Land*, his last collection of new poems to be published.

The Promised Land

La tierra prometida (*The Promised Land)* powerfully evokes Soto Vélez's grand vision for complete justice and freedom for humanity, and demonstrates a culmination of poetic themes and techniques, as he implores his readers to rebel not only against the oppression of imperialism but also the imprisonment of ignorance. The "promised land" accrues layers of meaning with each subsequent poem, yielding what Espada and Pérez-Bustillo call a "monumental work" that espouses the "radical egalitarian vision…[that] is the driving force behind all" (*The Blood* 9, 10) of Soto Vélez's work. The phrase "the promised land" possesses a variety of connotations, the most common of which relates to God's promise in the Old Testament to deliver the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and "into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (*New American Bible*, Exodus 3:8); thus, this collection possesses religious, or perhaps more accurately, spiritual, undertones. I say spiritual because while we know that Soto Vélez was a committed socialist, there is no indication that he practiced Christianity or any other organized religion. Despite this, he grew up in a predominantly Catholic country and the leader of the Nationalist Party, Pedro Albizu Campos, espoused a brand of nationalism that strongly intertwined with Catholicism (Ayala and Bernabe 105). It is highly likely, then, that Soto Vélez was familiar with biblical stories and imagery, and was surely well aware of the power of "the promised land" as a signifier. His use of this image, in

addition to others throughout the collection that would be familiar to most Western readers, such as "doves" and "the word" ("#2"), bring to mind Christian symbolism and ideologies, however, he assigns them new meanings. Thus, his implicit rather than explicit biblical references seem to be a rhetorical device he uses to engage his audience and encourage them to reconsider the narratives (and resultant paradigms) that structure their lives. Espada believes that, for Soto Vélez, the "promised land is, of course, an independent Puerto Rico; the phrase also evokes the wanderings of the Puerto Rican diaspora, and the homeland it seeks" (*The Blood* 10). I would add that for Soto Vélez, the promised land also represents a place where the word, which he calls "the subversive verb" in poem "#35," is revered for its prolific power; poetry, as well as the ideas it imparts, becomes a forceful weapon in the fight against oppression and injustice of all kind.

In poem "#2," as in the entire collection, Soto Vélez employs a revolutionary form to define his "promised land" and the ideologies it upholds; while he continues to use juxtaposition, his verses are without any punctuation and his lines become significantly shorter, often entailing just one word, which serves to highlight that specific idea or image. In the opening lines, Soto Vélez writes:

> the promised land
>
> is
>
> a solemn song
>
> attacking
>
> the genesis of
>
> the cosmos (3-6)

By using the words “solemn” and “attacking” the poet characterizes the promised land as a serious and even aggressive place where traditional notions about the origins of the universe are challenged; moreover, it is a place that incites “insubordination” among those who are “victimized” (10) or oppressed. Here, Soto Vélez uses poetry to “reconstruct a new world order” (Harlow 33), one in which the usual connotations of the promised land – as a place of abundance and perfection – are destabilized. Thus, the promised land takes on characteristics of a battle field, depicted as “the attacking / roar / of insurgent clamor” (43-44); rather than a space of tranquility that is devoid of human tragedy and available only to those who have been “saved,” it becomes a location of activity and insurgence, and humanity is called to break the bonds of intellectual imprisonment and advance in their knowledge. The promised land then transforms from a song into

> a promise
> that roars
> through the insubordinate fire
> of understanding in action
> where
> the mystery of the word
> is
> the first gallop of radiant darkness (20-27)

In this instance the promised land becomes a howling pledge and also a place where the word initiates knowledge and action. Once again, Soto Vélez employs a biblical reference, this time to the “word of the Lord” with the line “the mystery of the word”

(25); here, he emphasizes not the word of God, but the power of the written word itself. By comparing the word to "radiant darkness" Soto Vélez employs the formal technique of juxtaposition to parallel the subversive theme of the poem and reinforce the new order in his promised land. While darkness and radiance do not typically go hand-in-hand, Soto Vélez places them side-by-side, once again encouraging his readers to shift the frameworks in which they think. The phrase "first gallop" is also important, as this suggests that the word, or poetry, initiates one's progression from ignorance and oppression ("darkness") to knowledge and meaningful existence ("light"). He further emphasizes this idea in the subsequent lines, where the promised land becomes a site that engenders the beginning ("dawning") of a "jubilant language" because the fire there is "fertile" or productive (30, 29).

As we've seen, Soto Vélez defines and describes the promised land through a chain of comparisons and juxtapositions that spiral from one philosophical idea to another, ultimately revealing a place where the poet is viewed as a "hero" and his "dissident" or subversive words are not suppressed but perpetuate the liberation struggle. For the poet, the promised land is not merely a location of freedom devoid of conflict; rather, it is a site where resistance continually operates and where poetry plays an inextricable role, for he describes it as a place "where / the arms of savage syllables / are suns rising / in the peaceful thunderclaps / of the guerilla tongue" (92-96). Because the "hero" fills "the guerilla band with guerilla poetry" (113) in the final lines, the hero of Soto Vélez's land is the poet, whose language and ideas are vital to the struggle. Moreover, the hero not only provides poetry, but also "blood" that "unchains" the "dissident word" (116-117), which then refuses to submit or "become / feathered

messengers" (121-122). Once more, the poet participates in the battle, both physically and culturally, and employs his/her words as weapons, compared to "bolts of lightning" (119), to incite the people to continue fighting. Finally, Soto Vélez's use of an array of words with connotations of resistance, such as "insubordination," "offensive," "insurgent," "subversive," and "dissent," underscore his message of rebellion and echo his passionate call to action.

Soto Vélez extrapolates on the poet's role in society and in the liberation struggle through vivid imagery and juxtaposition in poem "#29" of this collection. By comparing the poet to "blood / that / keeps / singing / after / it / congeals" (17-23), he identifies the poet as one who continually fights for freedom even after death because his work will continue to "circulate" and perpetuate "insurrection" (25, 26). He endows the poet with a rebellious spirit, whose art becomes immortal and provides "light" or knowledge for "humanity" (4). As in his previous works, Soto Vélez employs juxtaposition of the concrete and the abstract throughout the poem, and of the mortal and immortal, which shows the seemingly contradictory roles of the poet. He calls the poet "the attacker of immortality" (9) and subsequently provides three adjectives in a row, not separated by commas, to describe the poet as "transcendent enduring ephemeral" (12). Here, the words "enduring" and "ephemeral" juxtapose the lasting or permanent with the fleeting or short-lived. With these three words, Soto Vélez captures the complexity of the poet; he possesses a lasting and permanent quality (through his art), and yet he is a transient, mortal being. The word "ephemeral" also has connotations of movement, and so he positions the poet as a wanderer, whose work and ideas travel to reach people even beyond his/her lifetime.

To add to the complexity of his characterization, Soto Vélez then compares the poet to a “perpetual fountain / that bends arguing / against its own form” (13-15). Once again, he provides the reader with a comparison full of juxtapositions of the tangible and intangible. A fountain is something generally considered solid, which the adjective “perpetual,” placed directly before it, reinforces. However, this fountain bends, or changes shape; it is no longer a fixed or static object, but is challenging (“arguing against”) its own shape. In the logic of the poem, the poet argues “against” his own form because his poetic form transcends the limitations of the human body and survives past its physicality. While the poet may argue against “immortality” – by writing about and reminding us of our own inevitable death – his “form,” or his poetry, stands in opposition to this mortality. Thus, the poet achieves immortality through his art, and can be compared to “blood / that / keeps / singing / after / it / congeals” (17-23). Significantly, Soto Vélez uses the word “singing” rather than another word, such as flowing, to describe the movement of the blood (or the poet). The act of singing carries a history of resistance dating back to slavery, when it was used both as a mechanism for survival and also as a coded critique of oppressive social structures. In this way, Soto Vélez characterizes the poet as rebellious and positions him within a history of resistance. He then returns to one of his initial definitions of the poet as a “light” and concludes with a bird-like depiction of the poet who possesses “wings of profound understanding” and is the place “from where all / men / or / all women / give / substance to their existence (40-46); once again, his images invite the readers to see the poet’s wide-ranging influence. Ultimately, the poet stands as a humanitarian with a deep capacity for empathy, and it is from his place of shared understanding with the rest of humanity (as expressed in his work) that others

can find meaning, or “substance,” in their lives. Soto Vélez’s use of duality and contradiction, as well as his juxtaposition of the tangible and intangible throughout the poem, reinforce the complex and yet essential role of the poet in society, particularly as a fellow comrade in any and all struggles for human liberation.

Soto Vélez situates not only the poet within a history of resistance but also the Puerto Rican people, whose steadfast resilience he highlights in poem “#65.” Through the use of anaphora and metaphor this poem, he proclaims the ongoing strength of the Puerto Rican people and encourages them to perpetuate the ethos of resistance they have inherited. The poem starts with the familiar phrase “the promised land / is” (1-2) that begins several others in the collection, and here he presents the promised land as a place of transformation and “understanding” (4), where

> the enamored soul of light
>
> ….
>
> does not
>
> allow
>
> itself
>
> to be
>
> dominated
>
> because
>
> the shape of death is a fermenting agent (12-20)

As in poem “#2,” Soto Vélez draws on light imagery, signifying life and truth, to indicate that the quest for liberation and knowledge does not succumb to domination or suppression. Despite a lack of punctuation, the subject of the poem shifts after line

twenty, as the poet turns to focus on defining what it means "to be Lares" (21-22) in the remainder of the verses. As already mentioned, the town of Lares holds deep significance in the national psyche of the Puerto Rican people, who would immediately recognize it as a symbol of resistance to colonial rule. September 23rd, the day of the uprising in 1868, was declared a national holiday in 1969; in addition, the town has been classified as a historic site by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, and is considered the birthplace of Puerto Rican nationalism ("Grito"). In the schema of the poem, then, the phrase "to be Lares" does not merely refer to someone originating from this specific city, but has broader connotations and could even be substituted with the phrase "to be Puerto Rican." The phrase "to be Lares" (repeated nine times in the course of the poem) appears for the first time immediately following the words "fermenting agent" (20); this structuring loosely associates "Lares" with concepts of change, agitation, or action, which Soto Vélez develops as the poem progresses.

In addition to a complete lack of punctuation, Soto Vélez structures the poem with descriptions of "Lares" that alternate between assertions and negations that play off of one another. He constructs his first characterization as a negation:

> to be
>
> Lares
>
> is
>
> not
>
> to be
>
> the bowing of the cloistered neck (21-26)

By defining what “Lares” or the Puerto Rican is not – one that does not bow their head or yield, even if they are confined – he implies that Puerto Ricans resist rather than succumb to oppression. In the lines that follow he builds on this depiction with a declaration: “to be / Lares / is / to be / indomitable durability” (27-31). In the poet’s view, the Puerto Rican spirit is resolute and enduring, and this strength passes on to future generations, who are described as “stone” (32) in the next line. As the poem develops, Soto Vélez’s depictions become more concrete as he turns to metaphors of nature in order to identify the character of his people. Once again, the comparisons alternate between negative and positive declarations:

> to be
>
> Lares
>
> is
>
> not
>
> to be
>
> the field of the castrated tree (43-48)

while a few lines later

> to be
>
> Lares
>
> is
>
> to be
>
> a garden (61-65)

In both of these instances, Soto Vélez uses comparisons that draw on the natural world. In the first lines, the powerful image of a tree that has been deprived of its vitality and

ability to reproduce describes what Lares is “not.” This contrasts with the image a few lines later of a garden, generally considered a fertile place of growth and life, giving off a pleasant “aroma” (70). Therefore, these juxtaposing images suggest a lively, not docile or powerless, Puerto Rican spirit that can even become “gold-bearing fury” (75) when necessary. He reinforces this temperament of defiance with his final characterization:

> to be
>
> Lares
>
> is
>
> to be
>
> the inciting climate
>
> of clandestine clamor (86-91)

The words “inciting,” “clandestine,” and “clamor” all resonate with notions of insurgency or subversive activity, thus, Soto Vélez proclaims resistance as an identifying characteristic of the town of Lares and by extension of the Puerto Rican people.

During a speech he gave in Worcester, MA in 1979, Soto Vélez proclaimed, “the poet who is not prepared to fight in this world is not a poet” (Bliss, R. 7), which succinctly but powerfully summarizes his characterization throughout his verses of the poet’s role in society and also corresponds to the way in which he lived his life. The distinctive form he develops throughout his poetic career reinforces his radical vision for a classless society where “knowledge becomes the creative instrument not of the few but of the many…[and] humanity will enjoy the beautifulness of freedom, for without freedom beautifulness becomes inconceivable” (Soto Vélez “Speeches” b8, f8). Although he approaches the issue of Puerto Rican colonialism and the fight for

independence on an abstract level, there is no doubt that he espouses an anti-imperialist as well as a socialist perspective in his work. In poem “#17” he praises the “universal worker” whose “song” he calls “resistance that brings grace” (68, 70); unlike some of the nationalist poets of his generation who were and remained solely concerned with Puerto Rican independence, Soto Vélez supported anti-colonial and labor struggles around the world, and was a committed social activist until his death in 1993. Like fellow Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos, and Latin American poets such as Pablo Neruda and César Vallejo, he advocated for freedom from oppression in all its forms; this consciousness of resistance and desire for social justice on a global level is taken up by the next generation of Puerto Rican poets, including Martín Espada and Naomi Ayala, who are discussed in the subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER V

"A POETRY LIKE AMMUNITION":
RESISTANCE AND SUBVERSION IN THE WORK OF MARTÍN ESPADA

"I cannot evict them
from my insomniac nights,
tenants in the city of coughing
and dead radiators."

-Espada, "City of Coughing and Dead Radiators"

In 2009 I took my eleven-year old niece, herself a young writer, to a reading Martín Espada was giving at Amherst Cinema as part of celebration of the town's 250th anniversary. After the reading, she decided to buy Espada's 2002 collection with her own money and shyly asked him to sign it for her. On the way home I asked her what she thought of the reading, and she replied, "He is amazing. I *love* the way he read the poem "Alabanza"; it was dramatic." Although a simple statement from a young girl, her response to this particular poem (that addresses the tragic events of September 11th) and continuing interest in Espada's poetry remains with me, as it reflects the accessibility, and the complexity, embedded in his verse. Part of this accessibility relates to Espada's gift in bringing large-scale, and often global, events to the local and deeply personal level. While my niece understood the content of the poem (she has grown up surrounded by a continuing discourse of 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the mainstream media), I believe she was able to connect with it because of how Espada fills the poem "with exact, human details" (Espada qtd in Stavans 69), such as "the cook with a shaven head" (1) and the "dishwasher" who "could not stop coughing" (28, 29).

"Alabanza," then, became my niece's point of entry into Espada's compelling world of political poetry, through which he shows his readers the lives of those who are marginalized in society, but in a way that captures the intricacies of their lived

experiences and does justice to their resilience in the face of ongoing adversity. This is the "poetry of advocacy" (Dick and Fisher 23), which is one way that Espada has characterized his own work over the years. He also aligns himself with a tradition of poets who write "poetry of the political imagination," which enables him to "speak[] on behalf of those without an opportunity to be heard" (*Zapata's Disciple* 100, 8). Throughout his verses, Espada protests the marginalization of Latinos, immigrants, and the working class by positioning them in the center of his poetic discourse; this rhetorical choice to focus on those who often occupy the fringes of society demonstrates one way in which his poetry embodies resistance. He employs allusion, rich metaphor, and visceral imagery to both document others' heroic acts of defiance and to denounce the injustices of colonialism and oppression around the world. The recurring tropes of history and music function as rhetorical strategies that enable the poet to challenge dominant historical narratives and to create alternative histories with his poems, which ultimately become realms of liberation and transformation for both his subjects and his readers. By constructing resistance within his own lines, Espada demonstrates to his readers that poetry itself has the power to resist oppressive social structures and demand social change.

Espada traces his advocacy heritage to Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda, two poets with whom he has been repeatedly compared and whom he cites as literary influences. Sandra Cisneros has declared Martín Espada "the Pablo Neruda of North American authors" (J. Murillo) and in several interviews Espada has discussed the ongoing influences of Whitman and Neruda on his work. In his interview with Edward Carvalho published in *Walt Whitman Quarterly* in 2006, Espada explains the wide-

reaching influence Whitman has had on generations of poets, and that he, among others, identifies with "Whitman the advocate" who "takes it upon himself to become a voice for the voiceless" ("A Branch"). In the September 2008 issue of *The Writer's Chronicle,* Espada notes that "[a]ll throughout "Song of Myself" Whitman keeps coming back to the most marginalized, the most condemned, the most despised people in society, not only prisoners and slaves but prostitutes. He is above all a poet of compassion, and compassion drives poetry of advocacy" (Dick and Fisher 24). In both interviews, Espada identifies some of the poets he views as descendants of Whitman, such as Langston Hughes, Carl Sandburg, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Marge Piercy, and Rafael Campo (Carvalho); he also clarifies that many Latino poets write within this tradition (so many that he cannot list them) due to the "social and economic conditions in which" they find themselves, based on the "sense of identification" they have "with their community" and because they know "that if they don't tell the story through their poetry, it may not get told" (Dick and Fisher 24). This is certainly the case in "City of Coughing and Dead Radiators" that documents and denounces the sub-standard living conditions immigrants and working-class people endure, and "The River Will Not Testify," which relates the untold story of the massacre of Native Americans at Turners Falls. In response to Carvalho's inquiry as to which of his poems he see as "distinctly Whitmanian," Espada comments:

> Whenever I write about work, I hear Whitman's voice. The work could be my own or someone else's work. But surely, "I Hear America Singing" is in my head and will never leave. When I write about people who are incarcerated, I hear Whitman's voice, and I've written quite a number of prison poems, based to a

large extent on my own experience working either as lawyer or a poet with people who have been incarcerated. (“A Branch”)

Among his many poems with these themes, “Alabanza,” his poem commemorating the restaurant workers who died in 9/11 comes to mind, as does “The Face on the Envelope,” his elegy to Julia de Burgos that also serves as a humanizing portrait of a Puerto Rican man incarcerated in Hartford.

Pablo Neruda, whom Espada identifies as “Whitman’s greatest disciple in the Spanish language” (Carvalho), has had an equally significant impact on Espada’s poetry, especially his latest collection, a section of which includes poems based on his visit to Chile in 2004 for the centenary celebration of Neruda’s birth. As one example of the connection he sees between Whitman and Neruda, Espada cites a line from Neruda’s “The Heights of Macchu Picchu” in which the poet “speaks to generations of dead laborers and says, ‘I come to speak through your dead mouths’. This is Neruda expressly taking on the role of advocate in the middle of the 20th century, just as Whitman had in the middle of the 19th century” (Carvalho). In the twenty-first century, Espada takes up this mantle with the poem “Something Escapes the Bonfire” (dedicated to Víctor and Joan Jara) that reminds readers of the brutality of the Pinochet dictatorship and the murder of political dissidents such as singer Víctor Jara.

The comparisons to Neruda and Whitman, then, point to a spirit of resistance that is a defining characteristic of Espada’s poetry, and is also part of a larger Puerto Rican poetic tradition; however, Espada’s vision of resistance expands beyond national or cultural borders to denounce injustice in various corners of the world. Puerto Rican poets, both on the island and the mainland, have written and continue to write poetry of

protest, which Espada identifies as "the most striking characteristic of Puerto Rican poetry in the United States" ("Documentaries" 262). For many, this conjures up poetry associated with the Nuyorican movement, in which New York Puerto Rican poets began expressing "the incongruities between the myth of the American Dream and the harsh realities encountered by their families upon migrating" (Hernandez 5). While Espada acknowledges the Nuyorican aesthetic as influential on his early poetry[17], his later work clearly and deliberately departs from this style. The predecessors of this movement, including Clemente Soto Vélez and Julia de Burgos, also express a specifically political Puerto Rican consciousness in their poetry that protests the island's ongoing colonial status and condemns the oppression of third-world peoples. It is alongside these writers that I situate Espada's work. In an interview with Ilan Stavans in 2005, Espada explains that his "deepest influence came from Soto Vélez, who became a close friend and mentor in the last decade of his life… Soto provided a political and ethical example for [him] to follow. His poems were powerfully surreal, and yet, totally engaged with the fate of humankind" (71). Moreover, Espada commemorates these poets with his elegies "Hands Without Irons Become Dragonflies" (for Soto Vélez) and "The Face on the Envelope" (for Burgos), additional indicators of their lasting influence on this contemporary poet. In addition to memorializing his mentor with elegiac poems, Espada worked to make Soto Vélez's poetry more accessible in the United States by translating, along with Camilo Pérez-Bustillo, twelve of Soto Vélez's poems into a bilingual collection, *The Blood That Keeps Singing*, published in 1991. Soto Vélez, Burgos, and Espada, who believes "one of the duties a poet must assume…is to challenge the "official history"

[17] See Espada's interview, "Poetry and Politics" in *Conversations with Ilan Stavans*

(Ratiner 173), each offer counter-narratives in their poetry that not only contribute to the work of restoring the nation's culture to itself (Said 215) but also advocate for equality and social justice on a global level. Situating Espada's verse alongside these two poets, and within the framework of resistance and social activist literature, demonstrates a tradition of resistance among a set of Puerto Rican poets outside the Nuyorican tradition; it also illustrates how this resistance moves beyond the national context and becomes transnational in scope.

Biographical Context and Critical Reception

In his essay "Zapata's Disciple and Perfect Brie," Espada explains that he was raised with "an ethos of resistance all around" (5) him which continues to manifest itself in his work. Born in 1957, he grew up in the working-class housing projects of East New York, and his life, as well as his writing, has been strongly influenced by his father's political activism and direct confrontation with racial discrimination. He worked a series of menial and low-income jobs including janitor, gas station attendant, salesman, bouncer, and desk clerk at a hotel, before obtaining a law degree from Northeastern University in 1985. He practiced bilingual education law and worked as a tenant lawyer for low-income Spanish-speaking people in Chelsea, Massachusetts before fully committing himself to the poet's vocation and teaching (*Zapata's* 6-7). His Puerto Rican heritage and work experiences – both inevitably political (as he discusses in his interview with Bruce Allen Dick) – have necessarily influenced his poetry, through which he continues his father's and his own commitment to fighting social injustice. As a poet, essayist, editor, and translator, he has produced an impressive range of publications including nine collections of poetry, two essay collections, two edited anthologies, and a

translated edition of Soto Vélez's poetry. In addition, he has won several awards for his work, including an American Book Award, the PEN/Revson Fellowship, the Patterson Poetry Prize, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, to name only a few. His books of poetry include *The Immigrant Iceboy's Bolero* (1982), *Trumpets from the Islands of Their Evictions* (1987), *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands* (1990), *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators* (1993), *Imagine the Angels of Bread* (1996), *A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen* (2000), *Alabanza: New and Selected Poems 1982-2002* (2002), *The Republic of Poetry* (2006), which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and *The Trouble Ball* (2011).

While Espada's work has gained increasing visibility over the years, he has been praised since his first publication for the "precision of his poetic snapshots" (Frost), for his "deft humor[]" (Freeman) and for the "distinctively expansive and humanistic" tone "of his uncompromising political poetry" (Harlan 24). In a *Booklist* review of Espada's 2002 collection, *Alabanza*, Ray Olson declares the poet has "forged a passionate, compelling, eminently readable poetry that makes him arguably the most important 'minority' U.S. poet since Langston Hughes" (1366). The critical scholarship on Espada's work also remarks on the intersection of the personal and the political, as well as the significance of history, evident in his poetry. In her essay, "Inside the Worlds of Latino Traveling Cultures: Martin Espada's Poetry of Rebellion," Santa Arias frames her discussion of Espada's work within a "context of movement and exchange" (2) and examines how Espada "constitutes his subjects, his autobiographical migrant history, and other Latino traveling cultures" (2). He analyzes "metaphors of travel" (2) he sees throughout the author's poetry to show how "these images…represent empowerment and

a form of resistance to dominant culture" (2). In "Visibility and History in the Poetry of Martín Espada" Thomas Fink argues that Espada's poems concerning Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries "constitute narrative and lyric representations of imperial, colonial, or otherwise oppressive power relations and make visible the struggle of common people to establish national autonomy and democratic conditions" (219). He analyzes a range of Espada's poems (mainly from his second, third, and fourth collections) that address "Puerto Rican *in/visibility* on the mainland" (205), the "distortion of [Puerto Rican] history" (210) in mainstream U.S. discourse, and in some analyses, such as that of "Cockroaches of Liberation" and "The Firing Squad is Singing in Chile," he discusses the ways in which Espada's poems illustrate "how oppositional strategy has been and can be developed" (214). Through his examination of the author's poems concerning the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile and the Sandinista forces in Nicaragua, Fink highlights the pan-Latino perspective woven throughout Espada's work.

César Salgado, in "About Martín Espada: A Profile," provides a concise overview of Espada's work, which begins with his depictions of "institutional neglect suffered by Latinos in rundown inner cities" (204) in his first book and has broadened to include "a new array of ethnoscapes" in *Alabanza* that "celebrate the overlapping of immigrant, revolutionary, and anti-colonial experience across American and non-American nations" (208). For more than twenty-five years, then, Espada has played the role of advocate with both admonition and empathy, from denouncing immigrant's poor living conditions in "Mrs. Baez Serves Coffee on the Third Floor" in his first collection *The Immigrant Iceboy's Bolero* (1982) to honoring the political activism and poetry of Dennis Brutus in

"Stone Hammered to Gravel" from a more recent collection, *The Republic of Poetry* (2008).

In Espada's earliest collections "Latino realities and identities" (Arias 3) are often the focus, and in the title poem from his 1987 collection, "Trumpets from the Islands of Their Evictions", he speaks out against the discrimination and injustices the working classes, Puerto Rican, and other Latino immigrants in the U.S. experience. In "Trumpets" the speaker moves the reader between two different locales – the island and a "barrio" (5) in the United States – where both "music" from Puerto Rico and "predatory squad cars" (5, 7) swarm in, indicating the hostility and violence the immigrants regularly experience. Throughout the poem, "eviction" holds double meaning, referring to both Puerto Ricans' exile from their homeland and also their exclusion from various aspects of social life in the U.S. Espada describes how "Mrs. Alfaro" and her "five children" (10, 33) are evicted from their apartment, Daniel is dismissed from his classroom for lacking adequate English skills, and his father is thrown off a bus and imprisoned because of his "brown skin" (19). Here, Espada "documents daily existence" (*Zapata's* 104) and provides names and faces to the countless Latinos who are continually marginalized from the dominant culture. In the next stanza, he juxtaposes this naming by underscoring the subjectivity Puerto Ricans are denied when they are "identified by case number" (29) rather than by name.

Despite this repeated discrimination, the poem does not end with defeat. This time, the "trumpets" the immigrants hear "from the islands of their eviction" (38, 39) endow them with strength and "scares away devils" (40), which perhaps refers to those (the landlord, the third-grade teacher, the grocery store clerk) who participate in the

evictions outlined earlier in the poem. Repeating the first four lines in the last stanza provides a cyclical nature to the poem, echoing the cyclical migration patterns of Puerto Ricans. While Espada shows the double dislocation Puerto Ricans experience as a result of migration, he also underscores music's ability to challenge oppression and re-establish one's sense of identity. This poem, then, reveals an early articulation in Espada's work of music as a tool of resistance, a trope that he builds on in his subsequent collections.

"Giving History a Human Face": Espada's Historical Poems

For many Puerto Ricans, their identity remains intertwined with their colonial history and their resistance to that subjugation[18], themes that figures prominently in several of Espada's poems, including "La tumba de Buenaventura Roig," "Colibrí," "Coca-Cola and Coco Frío," "The Lover of a Subversive is also a Subversive," and "Inheritance of Waterfalls and Sharks." The title poem of his fourth collection, "Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands (Pellín and Nina)" challenges the master colonial narrative of the Ponce Massacre and offers an alternative perspective of this significant event in Puerto Rican national history, thereby demonstrating two fundamental elements of resistance poetry. The central metaphor of the poem – the circle – also functions as a rhetorical strategy that Espada utilizes to emphasize and promote ongoing resistance to injustice. The poem itself is structured as a circle, with stanzas one and three and two and four mirroring each other in tone, theme, and to some extent length.

While some readers may not be familiar with the details of this bloody event, Espada's vivid language and use of enjambment in the first stanza powerfully convey

[18] See Espada's essay, "Documentaries and Declamadores: Puerto Rican Poetry in the United States".

how quickly this peaceful protest transformed into a scene of chaos and violence. Soon after "the marchers gathered" (1) violence breaks out and several "Nationalists" (1) including "Pellín" are shot. Espada describes the scene thus:

> Around him stormed
>
> the frenzied clattering drumbeat
>
> of machine guns,
>
> the stampede of terrified limbs
>
> and the panicked wail
>
> that rushed babbling
>
> past his dim senses. (12-18)

Although written in the past tense, Espada's use of action verbs and powerful adjectives here evokes a sense of movement throughout the stanza and lends it a tumultuous tone. The words "stormed," "frenzied," "clattering," "stampede," and "rushed," relay the turbulent atmosphere that transpired, while "terrified," "panicked," and "wail," capture the frightened nature of those caught in the crossfire of "machine guns" (14). A similar scene of violence recurs in stanza three.

In contrast to the lively descriptions in the first stanza, the second exhibits a journalistic character and a somber tone that allows the reader to contemplate the reality of the tragedy. Espada achieves this with the dateline-like first line, "Palm Sunday, 1937:" (19) which he follows with seven short lines of between three and four words. Through these quick and factual phrases, the reader discovers that Pellín and Nina were engaged and that the news "halted the circular motion / of his lover's hands" (21-22), who was embroidering her wedding dress. Just as Nina's hands stop moving, Espada

slows down the action of the poem and lets the seriousness of this event weigh on the reader the way it does on Pellín's fiancé, who "nodded, knew / before she was told" (25-26). The circular motion of Nina's hands parallels the circularity of the poem and also correlates with the central metaphor of the poem, which Espada introduces with the title but does not actually present until the last stanza.

The pace of the poem picks up again in the third stanza, where we witness the repetition of violence against Puerto Ricans, but this time in the diaspora of "Nueva York" (29). Instead of Pellín, however, it is Nina's son who is caught up in "the whip of nightsticks" (35) for speaking out against injustice "in a bullhorn shout" (32), which demonstrates both the inherited legacy of colonial repression and brutality, and the Puerto Rican people's resistance to that repression. Through the use of vivid phrases, many of which are analogous to ones used in the first stanza, the narrative of violence Espada relays here harkens back to the account of the Ponce Massacre in the first stanza and provides a sense of circularity to the poem. Looking at the stanzas side-by-side, several phrases stand out as exemplary of the turmoil and brutality that first Pellín and then Nina's son experience due to their political protestations:

Stanza 1:	Stanza 3:
"clattering drumbeat" (13)	"bullhorn shout" (32)
"machine guns" (14)	"rifles" (31)
"stampede of terrified limbs" (15)	"furious swell of hands and shoulders" (34)
"bloody soup of his own body" (9)	"fresh blood / stinging from the scalp" (36-37)

In this third stanza, then, Espada constructs a parallel scene of violent repression and his use of the present tense makes the violence feel even more immediate to the reader.

Moreover, he demonstrates how the will to fight against injustice is passed down from one generation to the next, which is reinforced in the final stanza.

Despite experiencing repeated discrimination, Espada emphasizes the Puerto Rican people's resilience and resistance to subjugation with his final words of defiance:

> But rebellion
> is the circle of a lover's hands,
> that must keep moving,
> always weaving. (38-41)

This fourth stanza circles back to the second stanza, both thematically and formally, as it refers back to "the circular motion" (21) of Nina's hands and also uses short lines to convey a powerful message. In contrast to the past tense of the second stanza, however, Espada employs the present continuous tense with the words "moving" and "weaving" (40, 41) to indicate the ongoing nature of resistance. In Espada's world of poetry, rebellion is an action not a noun, and even possesses an agency of its own, since it "must keep moving" (41).

This poem not only chronicles the resistance that took place in 1937, but also enacts resistance by challenging the dominant narrative of the event. The immediate U.S. media coverage of this event, which blamed the Nationalists for instigating the violence, significantly shaped the way the event was recorded into history and the subsequent portrayal of the Nationalist Party as violent aggressors. A *New York Times* article on the day of the massacre (March 22, 1937) reported: "According to the police version there was disorder, during which some one in the Nationalist crowd fired and some policemen were wounded. The police then returned the fire" ("7 Die in Puerto Rico Riot"). A

subsequent article on March 31, 1937 reported that according to then Attorney General Fernandez Garcia, a government investigation of the Ponce Massacre found "conclusive evidence the first shot had been fired from the corner in front of the Nationalist Club" ("Reports on Ponce Riot"). However, according to César Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, authors of *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898*, the "Cadetes de la Republica" (116) were unarmed. In addition, historian Stan Steiner clarifies that an investigation of the events by the ACLU blamed Governor Winship (appointed by President Roosevelt) and the police for the massacre (*The Islands* 228). Despite the ACLU report and first-hand accounts from those present, the colonizers had the final word and the event was inaccurately rendered in history. Espada creates resistance with this poem by writing an alternate version of this event that focuses on specific individuals affected by the tragedy, thereby contesting the inaccurate and impersonal historical renditions. Unlike the "some one in the Nationalist crowd" mentioned in *The New York Times* article, Espada focuses on Pellín and Nina to tell the larger story of this massacre, and in this way accomplishes his belief that poets "must work to give history a human face, eyes, nose, mouth" (Espada qtd Stavans 69) through their craft. By providing a space for stories like Pellín and Nina's, which are almost always left out of historical narratives, Espada's poem participates in the "struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production" (Harlow 28-29), and imagines new ways of recording history.

As a poem that commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Ponce Massacre, Espada's verse serves as "a repository for popular memory and consciousness" (Harlow 34) and promotes the Puerto Rican people's "rebellion" (38) against the various injustices

they continue to experience. By situating his metaphor for rebellion within one of the most important events in Puerto Rican history, Espada shows his subjects how their past can inform their present. He uses his people's brave history of resistance as a rhetorical strategy to encourage their ongoing protest against the injustices they experience and to provide hope. Espada reinforces this idea of continuity through his use of the adjective "always" to describe the movement of rebellion; like the circle he describes and employs in his poem, Espada demonstrates that the struggle against injustice has no beginning or end.

Historical events and injustices also inform Espada's poem, "Inheritance of Waterfalls and Sharks," a poem dedicated to his son Klemente; in these verses, Espada chronicles the various ways throughout history Puerto Ricans have resisted colonial ideologies and he underscores the central role of the word in that struggle. The poem spans over a hundred years, beginning "in 1898" (1) with the U.S. invasion of the island, where "troops speared mangos with bayonets…[and] General Miles…promised Puerto Rico the *blessings of enlightened civilization*" (6, 8, 10). Espada utilizes italics to draw attention this phrase, and in the subsequent three stanzas he emphasizes the irony of it by destabilizing the notion that only canonized British writers (in this case Shakespeare) are capable of fostering enlightenment. Instead, in this poem, Shakespeare becomes a means to an end (for the speaker's great-great-grand uncle, Don Luis, to acquire "rice and beans") rather than an inspiration. In Puerto Rico, Hamlet is "saluted by rum" while "the ghost of "Hamlet's father wander[s] through the ceremonial ballcourts of the Taino" (20-21), suggesting not only the insidious effects of colonialism, but also the ingenuity of the colonized people in modifying and adapting the colonial culture they are forced to inherit

(by saluting it with rum). Rather than Shakespeare, Don Luis draws upon writers such as Cervantes and Marx as a "reader at the cigar factory" (23) to motivate the tobacco workers and later the "canecutters" of Brazil, to fight for better working conditions. Regardless of where Don Luis lives, he "whip[s] Quijote's sword overhead" (36), indicating that he uses the power of words to fight injustice. This is a prominent theme of the poem, as well as in much of Espada's work, for he believes that "a poem can be as useful as a hammer" in constructing change (Zapata's 11-12).

As the poem progresses, Espada moves the reader through time to the twentieth century and exposes the ongoing injustices on the island, where "still the warships scavenge Puerto Rico's beaches" (37-38) and the results of U.S. colonialism continue to oppress and even kill a "fisherman" whose "lung" becomes filled with a "tumor" caused by the U.S. Navy's weapons that leak "uranium over Vieques" (41, 42, 39). While the speaker notes his family's physical dislocation from Puerto Rico, stating they have "no will, no house, no farm, no island" (40), they are not removed from its social and political culture; he emphasizes their connection to the place of their heritage through memory, and perhaps more importantly, words and action. His son is the "great-great-great-grand nephew of Don Luis," is "named for a jailed poet" (Clemente Soto Vélez), and was "fathered by another poet" (41, 42). Here, he establishes a lineage of Puerto Rican intellectuals and political activists that his son will take his place among when he stands on "the podium to read his poem about El Yunque waterfalls and Achill basking sharks" (48-49). Although we do not see Klemente's poem in its entirety, the speaker's tone indicates that his son's verse demonstrates an inherited political and cultural sensibility that will enable him to continue to speak out and fight against social injustices. In his

essay, "Poetry like Bread," Espada states, "any oppressive social condition, before it can change, must be named and condemned in words that persuade by stirring the emotions, awakening the senses" (100). Espada accomplishes this in the poem through his vivid descriptions ("speared mangos," "shredded yellow flesh," "leaves of tobacco to smolder in distant mouths," "the tumor is a creature") and his denunciation of the ongoing colonial practices of the United States.

The importance of historical moments continues to permeate Espada's successive collections and features as a main theme in "The River Will Not Testify" (from *A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen*), in which he critiques how U.S. historical monuments sustain ideologies of American imperialism. The voices and stories of Native peoples have continually been excluded from the national narrative, which is why "the river cannot testify" (7) to the atrocities that occurred at Turners Falls[19] in 1676. Because many of the Native Americans died in the falls during this conflict, "the river" becomes a metaphor for them in the poem; since they cannot attest to the injustices committed against them, the poet speaks on their behalf. Espada employs personification, repetition, and allusion to denounce the inaccuracy, and even injustice, of "official" history that vilifies the "Indians" (45) and commemorates the "Puritans" (18), whose version of the conflict at Turners Falls (and countless other encounters between the colonists and Native peoples in early America) is the one recorded in "the granite monument" (44) and the

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[19] In May 1676, the tribes at Peskeompscut ("the Amerindian name for the great falls at present-day Turners Falls") raided an English settlement in Hatfield and stole some of their cattle. A few days later, 150 men, led by Captain William Turner, snuck up on the Amerindian encampment while the inhabitants were still sleeping, thrust their guns "directly into the wigwams and fired" (Klekowski). According to Ed Klekowski, "many of the Amerindians were killed immediately, some leapt into the Connecticut River, to be swept over the falls and drowned. The colonials were ruthless in their attack, searching through the camp and killing women, children, old people. No one was spared." Neighboring tribes chased and battled with the Englishmen while they retreated, during which Captain Turner was killed; the falls were renamed after him.

history books, and therefore, passed on as *the* historical account of what occurred. Jahan Ramazani[20] explains that empire not only "expropriate[s] the land, displacing native names, myths and attachments, [but also] marginalize[s] and disfigure[s] indigenous narratives of the past, subordinating them to 'the Western powers' monumental histories" (155). "The River Will Not Testify" speaks of exactly this: the displacing of "all the names" (7) of the Native people present at Turners Falls and the subordination of their narrative to the words engraved on the granite monument. To counter this, Espada's poem challenges the repeated silencing of Native Americans at the same time that it "recreat[es] and reclaim[s] a communal history" (Ramazani 155) that more honestly captures the contentious history of this site.

To convey the unsettling history of this place and establish a frightening mood, Espada employs personification and dark imagery in the first stanza. The first line, the "shards of bone gnawed by water" swirling in the "river's belly" (1) conveys a visceral and haunting image of the river that disrupts the pastoral and idyllic representation of rivers that readers often encounter in poetry. Espada builds on this subversive depiction in the next few lines, where the river "thrashes," "strangles," and "hiss[es]" (3, 4, 5). The violence in these lines becomes even more powerful as the reader completes the poem and learns that hundreds of Indians met their death in these waters, which now carries the brutality they experienced in its current. Even though the river (like the Native Americans) resists its strangulation by thrashing and "hissing," it is ultimately silenced, as "Concrete stops the river's tongue at Turners Falls" (6). Viewed within the entirety of the poem, Espada's image of the dammed river serves as a critique of the unnaturalness

[20] In this quote, Ramazani is summarizing Edward Said's notions of cultural decolonization, outlined in his book, *Culture and Imperialism.*

of the Indian homicides, and by extension of Euro-American colonialism. By employing a traditional image in a subversive way, Espada challenges the reader's preconceived ideas about the way imagery is used in poetry, and by extension, the way history is written; this rhetorical strategy, then, creates resistance to dominant narratives and allows the other sides of history to emerge.

Espada's skillful use of repetition highlights the tragedy of this event and underscores its inaccurate rendering in history. Stanzas two through six all begin, "the river cannot testify" (7), which emphasizes the repeated historical silencing of Native Americans and also the ignorance among the general U.S. population of their distinct tribal customs and histories. For example, in stanza two, Espada writes:

> The river cannot testify to all the names:
> Peskeomskut, gather place at the falls;
> Sokoki, Nipmuck, Pocumtuck, many nations, many hands
> that speared the flapping salmon from the rocks,
> stitched the strips of white birch into wigwams. (7-11)

Here, the "*three hundred Indians*" (45) grouped together on "the granite monument" (44) become active and distinct subjects rather than objects, and we learn how they utilized their natural surroundings as sources of food and shelter. Moreover, Espada's rhetorical choice to names the tribes involved in this conflict before the naming any of the colonists, thereby focusing on those typically left out historical narratives, demonstrates another way in which the poem expresses resistance.

Although "the river cannot testify of May 19, 1676" (16), the speaker informs us that "Captain Turner's men … / slipped between the wigwams" (18, 19) with their

muskets and opened fire on the "…*old men, women and children…*" (14). Despite the fact that the "Reverend Mr. Russell" acknowledges premeditation of the attack when he claims, "…*The Lord calls us / to make some trial which may be done against them*" (14-15), the colonists then misreport their massacre when "Reverend Mr. Mather wrote: / *The river swept them away, that ancient river, oh my soul.*" (32-33). Although history memorializes Captain Turner with "his name christen[ing] the falls, the town" (44), Espada stresses that none of the Indians' names are recorded in the history books; in fact, their individuality is deemed so unimportant that "the river cannot testify to say what warrior's musket / shot Captain Turner" (40-41). Espada's poem, then, opposes the absence of Native peoples from the historical record and defies the colonists' portrayal of them as "green demons" (38). Instead, Espada offers us a depiction of the Puritans as "conquerors" (37) who used "their furious God" (22) as justification for their slaughter.

Espada compresses the passage of time in the last two stanzas and offers his readers a quick overview of the events that have transpired "at this place" (63) since the massacre of 1676. In the last stanza, he paints a bleak picture for the future of the town:

> when the monuments of war have cracked
> into hieroglyphics no one can read,
> when the rain sizzles with a nameless poison,
> when the current drunk on its own liquor
> storms through the crumbling of the dam,
> the river will not testify of Turners Falls,
> for the river has swept them away, oh my soul. (68-74)

In Espada's rendition of history, Captain Turner will not be remembered and glorified, but will meet the same end as the Native Americans he mercilessly murdered; he will be washed away and erased from the historical narrative. By appropriating the words of Reverend Mather in the last line, Espada turns the language of the colonists against them and effectively alters the narrative of this event. Again, he demonstrates the word as a powerful tool of resistance, for it is through words that the poet confronts historical injustices and constructs new (and arguably more equitable) narratives. In this way, Espada's poem refutes "the cultural oppression of imperialism" (Harlow 37) embedded in our historiography and participates in the process of cultural decolonization.

Transnational Poems of Resistance

In Espada's next collection, *Alabanza*, we see the poet continue to broaden his poetic scope as he travels from Mexico in "Sing Zapatista" to Ireland in "Now the Dead Will Dance the Mambo," which also addresses resistance to colonial rule. This poem clearly exemplifies a transnational poetics of resistance in Espada's work, as it expresses an "inter/transcultural dialogue" (Seyhan 4) across cultures, languages, histories, and geographies. While the poem begins in Ireland, Espada takes the reader across the Atlantic to "Brooklyn" (12) and then to "Ponce, Puerto" (21) to highlight the connections he sees between Ireland and Puerto Rico as a result of their shared experiences with colonialism. As in "Trumpets," music functions in this poem as a vehicle of resistance that transcends geographical, cultural, and even temporal boundaries and ultimately leads to transformation.

With images such as the "shadow of a cloud" (1) rolling off a mountain, shirts that "sagged in rain" (3), and Irish music sung from "tongues sod-hard with lament" (6)

in the first stanza, Espada establishes a somber mood that almost prepares the reader for the "the BBC news" (7): "*Tito Puente, The Mambo King, dead in New York*" (8). This last line, while serving as a transition from one stanza to the next, demonstrates how globalization enables the unprecedented movement of people, commodities (in this case Puente's music), and cultures from one region to another (Clifford); it also illustrates the transnational character of Espada's poem, which like other transnational texts both acknowledges and depends upon "external points of reference" (Giles 6) to construct a transcultural narrative.

Throughout the poem Espada blurs the boundaries between the national and cultural borders of Ireland and Puerto Rico (and to some extent the United States), first through a direct comparison of their musical instruments in stanza two, and then by drawing parallels between their countries' "Easter dead" (25) – those who died fighting for their nation's independence – in stanza three. After reflecting on a performance by Tito Puente he attended in Boston, where "Tito's drumstick, / splintered from repeating, always repeating the beat of slaves" (16-17), he writes:

> Here, on this island, I rehearse the Irish word for drum:
>
> *bodhrán*, gripped by hand like the pandereta,
>
> circle of skin and wood for the grandchildren of slaves
>
> to thump as they sang the news in Ponce, Puerto Rico. (18-21)

In addition to placing the Irish and Puerto Rican drums – the bodhrán and pandereta – side by side in the same line, Espada informs the reader that musicians hold these drums in the same manner, which draws connections between these two cultures. In these lines, Espada "reconfigures the relations among…ingredients drawn from disparate cultural

worlds" and fuses them "with [the] verbal and formal space" of the poem (Ramazani 18). Finally, in these lines Espada alludes to the pandereta's origins during slavery in Puerto Rico and its continued use by the Puerto Ricans; this emphasizes not only the legacy of subjugation on the island but also the Puerto Rican people's use of music to resist that oppression, which Tito's "repeating" beat perpetuates. Although Puente (like thousands of other Puerto Ricans) was born and raised in Spanish Harlem ("Tito Puente"), Espada highlights how he carries his nation's history with him through his musical performances, underscoring how art, whether poetry or music, "sustains national continuity" within popular consciousness (Harlow 34) and participates in cultural decolonization.

Stanza three focuses on the armed struggle for liberation in both Ireland and Puerto Rico, where the speaker and bartender in an Irish pub exchange details about their countries' nationalist uprisings and national heroes. The pub displays "the posters of their Easter dead" (25) and the bartender recounts James Connolly's[21] noble resistance to the British army even though he was "strapped to a chair… / gangrene feasting on his wound so he could not stand" (30-31). The speaker then tells the bartender Puerto Rico also "has its Easter dead" (32) and relates details about the Ponce Massacre of 1937, where "Cadets of the Republic / paint[ed] slogans on the street in their belly-blood" (34-35). These lines echo those from "Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands," which addresses the brutality and injustice of the Ponce Massacre in greater detail. This stanza,

[21] James Connolly was Commandant of the Irish Citizen Army in 1914, and as Commandant General of the Dublin Division of the Army of the Republic, he was actively involved in the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916 (that sought to end British rule and establish an independent Republic of Ireland), for which he was executed by the British army ("James Connolly")

then, documents and honors these patriots' acts of resistance in the face of violent oppression, and also demonstrates the global scope of the struggle against empire in the twentieth century.

There is a shift in both mood and theme in the last stanza that creates a space of redemption within the poem. In contrast to the solemn rain that sets the scene in the preceding stanza, the upbeat tempo of "Tito's *Oye Como Va*" (40) plays on the jukebox in the fourth as the speaker and his friends "shoot a game of pool in his memory" (43) and "the table becomes a dance floor at the Palladium / cue ball spinning through a crowd of red and green" (45-46). The music the patrons in the bar hear, not only Tito Puente's, but also "the Dubliner's" (40), endows them with a sense of empowerment as they nod their heads and chant "*yes-yes, yes-yes*" (42). This affirmative statement, channeled through the music, illustrates a shift from struggle (in the third stanza) to empowerment, which also extends to James Connolly, who now "could dance the mambo, / gangrene forever banished from his leg" (46-47). Through Puente's music, and by extension Espada's poem, Connolly undergoes a transformation. Literally, he moves from a restrained seated position to one of uninhibited dancing; figuratively, he now occupies a space of liberation that he fought for, but was denied, in "1916" (27).

By engaging two geopolitical landscapes and intertwining their histories, Espada's poem expresses a transnational poetics of resistance. While the Irish and Puerto Rican people differ in many ways, Espada highlights a commonality by drawing attention to their people's shared history of resistance and the vital role music plays in that struggle. Through a continual crossing of borders, Espada emphasizes the fluidity of culture as well as the interconnectedness of the human struggle for justice. By

highlighting two significant uprisings in these countries' colonial histories, Espada challenges master narratives of empire and demonstrates how art enacts both resistance and transformation.

In the title poem of his 2002 collection, "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100," which has been called "the definitive poem about the September 11 tragedy" (Murillo), Espada positions those who often occupy the margins of society – the "immigrants from the kitchen" (16) – at the center of his poetic praise. He addresses global issues, such as war, terrorism, and religious conflict through local details, and through the motif of music his poem works to resist boundaries – national, cultural, and religious – that have become re-inscribed after September 11th. Espada highlights the resilience of the hotel and restaurant employees of Windows of the World Restaurant, to whom he dedicates his poem, by focusing on specific aspects of their difficult working class lives. He emphasizes sensory details, particularly those of sight and sound, so as to place the reader into the kitchen with the Puerto Rican "cook with a shaven head" (1) in the first stanza, the "busboy" (25) in the second, and the "waitress who heard the radio in the kitchen / and sang to herself about a man gone" (32-33) in the third. In stanza three, he praises "…the dishwasher / who worked that morning because another dishwasher / could not stop coughing" (28-29) and because he needed the extra money to send to his family "floating away on some Caribbean island plagued by frogs" (31). This shows both the compassion and work ethic of the dishwasher, who sacrifices his time (and ultimately his life) for his fellow worker and family. This portrayal also challenges negative mainstream characterizations of immigrants, who Espada says "make an enormous contribution to this economy" (Dick and Fisher 27) despite media depictions to the

contrary. While this is a glimpse of only one dishwasher's life, this "dish-dog" (27) symbolizes the countless immigrants and working-class individuals whose sacrifices and lives remain invisible to mainstream society.

Through the image of windows, Espada not only allows the reader to look in, so to speak, on the lives of immigrants (thus making them visible), but he also underscores the transnational character of New York City:

> Praise the great windows where immigrants from the kitchen
>
> could squint and almost see their world, hear the chant of nations:
>
> *Ecuador, México, Republica Dominicana,*
>
> *Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh*. (18-19)

By placing geographically distant nations such as Haiti and Yemen side by side, Espada emphasizes the constant intersection of cultures and languages that occurs in New York. Moreover, italicizing the names of these countries links them with the word "*Alabanza*" ("praise") (1), one of the few sections in the poem formatted as such; by doing this, Espada deconstructs boundaries between people based on nationality and also "pay[s] homage" (*Zapata's* 7) to the various immigrant communities that contribute positively to our society.

Despite their hardships, the subjects of Espada's poem persevere through the help of music, a motif that recurs in each stanza of the poem. In the first stanza, Espada praises "the kitchen radio" (11) whose dial is turned on "even before the dial on the oven, so that music and Spanish / rose before bread" (12-13). Bread often symbolizes a basic necessity for survival, and here Espada draws on that association to demonstrate the vital and nourishing role that music plays in these workers' lives. Connecting to music

provides the immigrants with strength and even functions as a healing agent in stanza three for the waitress who sings to herself as a way of coping with her lost love. In the last stanza, Espada alludes to the beginning of the war in Afghanistan and provides the reader with the image of "two constellations of smoke" (45) that mingle with one another "in icy air" (46):

> …and one said with an Afghan tongue:
>
> *Teach me to dance. We have no music here.*
>
> And the other said with a Spanish tongue:
>
> *I will teach you. Music is all we have.* (46-49)

By providing us with a perhaps unexpected image here – an Afghani and a Hispanic person befriending rather than battling one another – Espada's poem resists the binary distinctions between East and West that flourished in much mainstream media after 9/11. His use of italics in these two lines also stresses the significance of music for the Spanish-speaking subject, who claims it as his only means of survival and even a marker of existence. Finally, even though these two people speak in different "tongue[s]" (48) or languages, they connect with one another through music, thereby symbolizing its unifying capabilities. As music is widely considered a universal language, it facilitates cross-cultural exchange within the poem and also signifies transcendence for the forty-three employees of the Local 100 to whom Espada pays tribute in his verse. By the end of the poem, then, Espada has taken us from Manhattan to Puerto Rico, Africa, the Middle East, Central America, and Afghanistan; this repeated movement across borders illustrates the shared humanity of both working-class immigrants and soldiers and underscores the transnational character of Espada's poem.

Espada's Intertextual Poetics

The Republic of Poetry, Espada's 2006 collection, has garnered as much praise as his previous work for its "rich…regenerative power" (Harlan) and for showcasing "a poetry of fire and passionate intelligence" (Hazo). The book is divided into three sections: the first inspired by his 2004 trip to Chile for the 100th anniversary celebration of Pablo Neruda's birth, the second comprised of elegies for fellow poets and writers, and the third consisting of several anti-war poems. Espada acknowledges that his "sense of appreciation" (Dick and Fisher 30) for people and places is finding its way even more into this poetry, which is evident in his poems "The Face on the Envelope" and "You Got a Song, Man," elegies for poets Julia de Burgos and Robert Creely, respectively. According to John Murillo, *Republic* "celebrates the resilience of the Chilean people…[it] is all about redemption" ("Republic of"). Poet Megan Harlan also picks up on this theme and believes "poetry is shown to bear the power to dissolve, reshape and illuminate the borders of time and place" (24). Fellow activist poet Sam Hamill describes this collection as "truly pan-American, drawing on its many traditions and daring to insist upon its dreams of justice and mercy even during the age of perpetual war." In his review in *The El Paso Times*, Rigoberto Gonzalez maintains that in "The Caves of Camuy," the final and most personal poem, "the collection comes full circle as Espada invokes the verses of Puerto Rican poet Clemente Soto Vélez and absorbs them into his being so as to learn how to live -- the first step toward the founding of a republic of poetry" ("Poet Creates"). This collection reinforces Espada's ongoing commitment to advocacy, his continuing quest for justice, and his enduring belief in the redemptive power of poetry.

Espada draws on his experiences in Chile in the first twelve poems, and while "the legacy of Gen. Augusto Pinochet's brutal dictatorship casts grisly shadows" (Harlan) throughout this first section, the power of Neruda's poetry holds center stage and demonstrates "the role played by the arts in the process of rebuilding" (Espada qtd in Murillo). In "Rain Without Rain" Espada fulfills his promise to the families of the "*desaparecidos*" (41), those who were incarcerated or murdered by the Pinochet dictatorship, and tells their story of protest, mourning, and the hope they find through poetry. Through precise language and imagery he depicts the "thousands" of "pilgrims" (2), including "men on horseback, [and] a chorus of schoolgirls" (7) arriving at Neruda's house and gathering around "the horsehoe path of the poet's tomb" (10). His use of words pertaining to the environment, such as "sea," "sand," "beach," and "rain," (4, 5, 6, 9) root the reader in the Chilean landscape, side-by-side with the demonstrators wearing "…signs strung / around their necks…" (12, 13); combined with this, his visceral images – "tape across the eyes, wires clamped to toes and genitals" (22) – poignantly convey the atrocities suffered by those who were captured. The poet's use of the gerund in the first stanza, followed by the present tense throughout the rest of the poem, conveys the feeling of being present at "Isla Negra" (5) listening to the "shouting [of] Whitman in Spanish over the sea" (4) and watching the protestors "walk, lips sewn up by the seamstress grief" (11).

Although assuming the role of advocate, like Neruda and Whitman before him, in communicating this act of protest and quest for justice he witnesses at the tomb, Espada also allows the demonstrators to speak for themselves:

my brother, my sister, my uncle, my cousin.

> *Give us the bones for the coffin,*
>
> *give us the coffin for the grave,*
>
> *give us the grave for the gravestone,*
>
> *give us the gravestone so we can sleep.* (27-31)

His use of italics to designate other speakers draws attention to their voices and emphasizes the significance of these lives, both past and present. The protestors' communal plea for the right (and need) to bury their dead demonstrates the emotional and psychological legacy of suffering left in the wake of "the dictator" (19). To combat this anguish, the Chilean people seek solace in the words of their beloved bard, whose verses give them the power to speak and the chance to heal:

> At the tomb, a woman silent all along
>
> Steps from the circle and says:
>
> *I want to sing. Neruda. Poem Twenty.*
>
> Then she climbs atop the tomb and sings:
>
> *Tonight I can write the saddest verses.* (47-51)

By concluding the poem with the woman's words, rather than his own, Espada honors both her individual courage to speak and the collective "resilience of the Chilean people" (Murillo "Republic of") who refuse to forget the lives of their loved ones. In keeping the words of Neruda alive, they also keep the spirit of their family members alive, who "burst from the sand at Isla Negra" (42) and "are born from the black petals of the rocks" (43). The title of the poem also acknowledges the presence of and serves as a metaphor for the deceased: the poet feels "there is rain without rain in the air" (9) at Neruda's home because the spirit of the "*desaparecidos*" is discernible even though they are not

physically present. Through his allusion to Whitman and his use of Neruda's tomb as the setting for the poem, Espada calls forth the wisdom and compassion of his predecessors in order to speak on behalf of the disappeared, to acknowledge this dark era of Chile's history, and to pay tribute to poetry's healing capabilities.

Just as Neruda's poetry offers hope to the families of the *desaparecidos*, Julia de Burgos' poetry provides inspiration to a prison inmate in Espada's elegy "The Face on the Envelope." Throughout this collection, poets from the past reappear but these are not just any poets; specifically, they are social activist writers such as Dennis Brutus, Robert Creely, Clemente Soto Vélez, and Julia de Burgos, who participated in social justice movements and enacted resistance both in their lives and through their poetry. Espada commemorates these authors' struggles and the power of their verse in beautifully crafted odes and elegies that demonstrate his place among them as a "premier poet of conscience" (J. Murillo). While Burgos may be well known among Puerto Ricans, she is rarely mentioned in mainstream poetry anthologies and is relatively unknown among the general U.S. public. With his poem, Espada introduces Burgos to a new generation and also demonstrates the continuing relevance of her poetry. For those unfamiliar with her life, Espada informs the reader that she was "tall, so tall, the whispers said" (1) that they had to amputate her legs so that she would fit into the "city coffin" (3). In addition, Espada relates her death "on a street in East Harlem" (5) without "discharge papers / from Goldwater Memorial Hospital" (6-7) and hints at her alcoholism when he states that she "slept off the last bottle of rum" (11). What Espada truly emphasizes, however, is the fact that "without her name, /…Julia's coffin sailed to a harbor / where the dead stand in the rain / patient as forgotten umbrellas" (12-14). Here, Espada highlights the importance

of a name, which endows a person with a subjectivity and distinguishes them from others; because Burgos lacks those "three words / like three pennies stolen from her purse" (9-10) at the time of her death, she becomes nonexistent, or "forgotten," in society. Fortunately, this does not become her permanent fate; when her death is discovered, her body is returned to her homeland where "parks and schools" (20) are named after her and her poetry is "memorized" (20).

Espada not only honors Burgos as a great Puerto Rican poet, but also humanizes "a nameless man from Puerto Rico / jailed in a city called Hartford" (24-25), who perseveres in drawing Burgos' face in precise detail and mails the drawing to Espada. The inmate's attention to detail in his drawing – "her eyelids so delicate they almost trembled" (31) – mirrors Espada's inclusion of specific facts pertaining to Burgos' life throughout the poem, both of which serve to underscore the importance of "return[ing] Julia's name to her" (22). While Burgos' name is resurrected on the island, it is the influence her poetry has many "years later" (24) on this inmate that Espada finds remarkable and that speaks of the enduring power of her verses. Burgos' poetry, specifically her poem "about the great river of Loíza," (26) provides the man with hope and inspires him to create his own art:

> Slowly, every night, as fluorescent light grew weary
> and threatened to quit, he would paint Julia's face
> on an envelope: her hair in waves of black, her lips red. (28-30)

Although his source of light becomes increasingly sparse, the man refuses to give up his creative endeavor and Espada suggests that it is Burgos' poem, which the inmate reads until "…the river gushed / through the faucet in his cell and sprayed his neck" (26-27),

that provides him with the strength to persist. The spirit of resistance the man discovers in Burgos' poetry, then, manifests itself in his own creativity and also compels him to send his drawing, along with a letter, to Espada.

The power of Burgos' poem, "Río Grande de Loíza," also speaks to Espada, as he engages directly with it in the third stanza. He writes:

> All her poems flowed river-blue, river-brown, river-red.
>
> Her Río Grande de Loíza was a fallen blue piece of sky;
>
> her river was a bloody stripe whenever the torrent
>
> burst and the hills would vomit mud. (15-18)

The lines he alludes to are based on the ninth stanza of Burgos' poem, which reads:

> Río Grande de Loíza!...Blue. Brown. Red.
>
> Blue mirror, fallen piece of blue sky.
>
> ……………………………………….
>
> red stripe of blood, when the rain falls
>
> in torrents and the hills vomit their mud. (31-36)

In his first line, Espada employs the word "flowed" to describe Burgos' poetry, and those familiar with her work know that she frequently employed water imagery in her verse; thus, when Espada states that her poems "flowed" he refers to both the symbolism Burgos utilized and also the lyrical characteristic of her writing. Through his paraphrase, which repeats recognizable elements from the original, Espada pays homage to one of Burgos' most well-known and admired pieces. Moreover, the intertextuality demonstrates Burgos' continuing aesthetic influence and exemplifies one way that Espada perpetuates her poetics of resistance.

Espada directly engages with another poet's words in "Stone Hammered to Gravel," which is dedicated to "*poet Dennis Brutus, at eighty*" and now appears on the front page of the website "Poets Against War," whose members consider it a fitting eulogy to Brutus who died in December 2009. The website "Poets Against War" was created in 2003 after 1,500 poets responded to poet Sam Hamill's request for poems protesting the Iraq war. According to the website, Hamill asked "about 50 fellow poets to 'reconstitute a Poets Against the War movement like the one organized to speak out against the war in Vietnam...to speak up for the conscience of our country and lend your names to our petition against this war' by submitting poems of protest that he would send to the White House." When he received more than a thousand poems within several days, the website was created to handle the large response, and now contains more than 20,000 protest poems from writers all around the world.

In "Stone Hammered to Gravel" Espada honors Brutus' heroic resistance to apartheid, his lifetime struggle for equality, and reminds readers of the significance of his poetry. Espada's repetition of the phrases "did not know" and "Did you know?" emphasize that Brutus, who is now acknowledged as one of the most important human rights activists of the twentieth-century, was a visionary, both in his activism and his writing. In the first half of the poem, Espada underscores how those complicit with the system of apartheid and repression in South Africa in the 1960s – "the office workers," "the secret policeman," the ambulance men," and "the guards at Robben Island" (1, 8, 14,19) – did not understand the significance of Brutus' protest and "did not know" (1) the lasting impact he would have in helping to change South African society. Espada

captures this notion particularly well with the image of Brutus and Mandela side-by-side in prison:

> The guards at Robben Island did not know,
>
> when you hammered stone to gravel with Mandela,
>
> that the South Africa of their fathers
>
> would be stone hammered to gravel by the inmates,
>
> who daydreamed a republic of the ballot
>
> but could not urinate without a guard's permission. (19-24)

Espada accomplishes multiple things with these lines and the image that gives the poem its title. First, by providing important biographical information on Brutus' life (here and in the earlier stanzas), he educates his readers as to the historical significance of Brutus and Mandela working together. As a poet concerned with historical omission and accuracy, it makes sense that Espada would want to inform his readers about a figure who is not as widely known as Mandela (who has world-wide name recognition) but whose struggle was equally important in "banish[ing] the apartheid" (31) system in South Africa. Second, his imagery utilizes paradox to make a point: although imprisoned, Brutus and Mandela will emancipate their fellow citizens from racist legal oppression, and while they literally destroy stone in jail, they will be the ones to help rebuild their country. In the fourth stanza, Espada directs specific questions, beginning with "Did you know?" (25), to Brutus; these questions serve to provide the reader with more background information on Brutus' life and to inquire as to whether Brutus himself could understand at the time the significance his actions would have on his country's future and

the influence he would come to have in the literary and academic world, where “college presidents and professors of English / would raise their wine glass to your name” (38-39).

In the final stanzas, Espada pays homage to the spirit of resistance that compels Brutus (as well as other poets) to write and speak out against injustice, despite repression. Espada asserts, “Never tell a poet: *Don’t say that*” (56) because he knows that poets, like Brutus, will speak even more forcefully when censored or denied the opportunity to do so. This is demonstrated by Brutus’ first collection of poems, which he wrote while incarcerated and “cloaked as letters to [his] sister-in-law” (53) because he was “banned” (52) from writing poetry. Espada concludes his poem by stating the title of this first collection, “*Sirens knuckles boots*” (60), three times. The repetition here reinforces Espada’s admiration for Brutus’ sense of urgency to write (“the words throbbed inside [his] skull” 59) and his perseverance in sending his political poems out to the world.

Imprisonment and political protest also feature as themes in “The God of the Weather-Beaten Face,” where Espada documents and honors the political and military resistance of Staff Sergeant Camilo Mejía; Mejía refused to return to the war in Iraq for moral reasons in 2004 and was sentenced to one year in prison by a U.S. military court for desertion despite “a pending decision by the army on his application for conscientious objector status” (Amnesty International). Mejía filed for a discharge as a conscientious objector because he believed the war was “illegal and immoral” (Amnesty International); in his essay, “Regaining My Humanity,” he says, “I realized that I was part of a war that I believed was immoral and criminal, a war of aggression, a war of imperial domination. I realized that acting upon my principles became incompatible with my role in the military, and I decided that I could not return to Iraq. By putting my weapon down, I chose to

reassert myself as a human being." In addition to writing Mejía's courageous resistance into history (as he does with Pellín and Nina in "Rebellion"), Espada's poem also condemns the immorality of the Iraq war and thus embodies an act of resistance in itself.

Rather than a journalistic account of Mejía's experience in Iraq and subsequent objection, Espada's poem blends the real and the imagined, as the poem begins with a meeting of various "gods," including "the crusader god," the "sword-maker god," and the "god of oil" (lines 2, 4, 9) who declare "*War*" (12). It is not until the fourth stanza that we learn this war specifically refers to the U.S. occupation of and war in Iraq that began in 2003. In the second stanza, however, Espada switches from the mythical setting of the war council of the gods to the real-life incidents of torture and abuse that "Sergeant Mejía" witnesses abroad, such as "machine-gun fire slicing heads from necks / with a roar that would be the envy of swords" (13, 16-17). In classic Espada-fashion, the visceral and haunting imagery he provides here powerfully conveys the brutality and horrors of war. In the midst of these atrocities – "through the moaning and sledgehammers" (21) used to beat prisoners to death – Sergeant Mejía hears "his father's song" (25):

> You are the God of the poor,
> The human and simple God,
> The God who sweats in the street,
> The God of the weather-beaten face. (31-34)

Here, Espada alludes to "the peasant mass of Nicaragua" (26) a song written in 1975 by Camilo's father, the famed Nicaraguan singer Carlos Mejía Godoy; the song serves as a protest of the social and political inequalities of the Latin American poor and as a

proclamation of Christ as a fellow worker who labored and suffered just as the poor do (Mulligan). With this allusion, Espada provides the reader with a small, but important part of Nicaraguan history that demonstrates a tradition of resistance both within the Mejía family and among the working poor. As in several of his other poems, Espada employs music as a tool for resistance. Hearing the "voice" (23) and powerful words of his father acts as the final catalyst in the Sergeant's decision to cease his participation in the war and actively resist the ideologies and orders of his commanders.

Although the word "*no*" that Sergeant Mejía utters to "the other gods" may appear insignificant – like "a pebble, a grain of rice" (37) – Espada demonstrates the power of this resistance in the next line, for "the word flipped the table at the war council" (38). Because of his objection to the war, Mejía's commanders (and subsequently the media) accuse him of being a "*coward*" (44) and he "walk[s] to jail" (43), where he joins other dissenters – "union organizer, hunger striker, freedom rider" (49) – who have also been oppressed for contesting unjust political or social policies and conditions. Espada's image of various dissidents "crowded" in the "cell" with Mejía (47), underscores the political repression that occurs in the twenty-first century even in the United States, the so-called beacon of democracy, and suggests the bravery that resistance entails.

In this powerful poem, Espada unabashedly puts a spotlight on the controversial war in Iraq and the abuses committed by the U.S. military that have become a recent and unsavory part of American history. More importantly, he elevates the sacrifice of Mejía (and the other objectors listed) to the heroic, placing him side-by-side with the "God of the weather-beaten face" (51) with whom he walks "though epiphany's gate" (54) in the last stanza. With this image, Espada illustrates how Mejía's imprisonment actually frees

him because he acts according to his moral principles rather than his military duty. In his essay, Mejía reinforces this notion when he says, "Behind these bars I sit a free man because I listened to a higher power, the voice of my conscience." Through his blend of the mythical and historical, Espada crafts an anti-war poem that promotes loyalty to human rights principles and social justice above loyalty to a government practicing neo-imperial policies in the name of spreading democracy.

In his poetry of resistance, which now spans three decades, Espada not only captures the nuances of the Puerto Rican experience with colonialism and migration, but also foregrounds issues of social class, racism, and economic exploitation across geographic, national, and cultural borders. The transnational elements of his poetry demonstrate an expansion of the poetic tradition of resistance he inherits from Clemente Soto Vélez and Julia de Burgos, who used their art as a vehicle of political expression and action. Through his use of metaphor and vivid imagery, Espada challenges negative perceptions of Latinos, immigrants, and the working class, humanizes these often-marginalized groups of people, and honors the "dignity of [their] defiance" (*Zapata's* 3). He defies "official" narratives of both United States and Puerto Rican history, and his (re)visionary accounts of significant historical events contribute to cultural decolonization. He believes one of the most remarkable characteristics of poetry of the political imagination "is the quality of hopefulness, testimony to the extraordinary resilience of that human quality. The prophetic voice resonates throughout the poetry; the poets sing of the possibility, the *certainty* of eventual justice" (105). Just as he did as a tenant lawyer, Espada advocates for justice in his poetry, which becomes a realm of redemption and liberation for both his subjects and his readers.

CHAPTER VI

"THE POWER BEHIND MY SONG": THE LANGUAGE OF RESISTANCE IN NAOMI AYALA'S POETRY

"This you in me wakes
and is always waking.
………………………..
In song we are made real,
We breathe"

-Ayala, "You in the Me of I"

In the final lines of "A Coqui in Nueva York" Naomi Ayala writes, "My song may be missing / a few fingers and its legs be bandaged up / but it's alive, loud, brave" (45-47). The speaker's "song" makes for a fitting description of Ayala's poetry, which reveals the hardships and pain her subjects endure, but also illustrates their courageous defiance and forceful voice in staking a place for themselves in both Puerto Rican and American society. The bilingual title serves as a synecdoche for the poem, which engages with issues of colonialism, circular migration, diaspora, discrimination, and ultimately, resilience. As a tree frog that is native to the island of Puerto Rico, the "coqui" stands out as a foreign or displaced element when located in the city of New York; however, the "loud mouth coqui" (1) of Ayala's poem "invade[s] the land of freedom with songs" (28) and confronts the oppression it experiences with a fearless "attitude" (25) that enables it to survive. Music, and specifically the act of singing, feature as recurring motifs, and the speakers and characters in her poems often express their resilience through song; in this way, Ayala's poetry shares a crucial characteristic with Espada's work, as both employ music as a rhetorical strategy of resistance and transformation. In Ayala's poetic world, song has various signifiers: it represents her individual voice and identity, a collective and historical voice of the Puerto Rican people,

her activism, and of course, her art. Her poetic voice resonates as passionate, empathetic, and even spiritual, and like Soto Vélez, her poetry is often experimental in terms of form and language. While many of her poems could be classified as narrative in the sense that she writes the stories of forgotten people and places, she often disrupts this form by employing short lines as well as unconventional punctuation and formatting. This challenge to form, then, mirrors the oppositional stance of her poems and demonstrates how she constructs resistance on the printed page. In "A Coqui," and throughout her verse, Ayala utilizes a variety of poetic techniques, including nature imagery and symbolism, repetition, allusion, and code-switching to craft a feminist discourse of resistance that testifies to and denounces social injustice and simultaneously expresses a female identity that seeks liberation through her understanding of history, her reverence for memory, and her relationship with the earth.

Because so many of her poems display this simultaneity of denouncing oppression while affirming survival and proclaiming identity it is difficult to categorize them; however, I have divided my discussion of her poetry into three sections: "Words of Defiance," "Poems of History and Memory," and "Songs of Female Identity." In "Words of Defiance" I discuss Ayala's poems that bear witness to injustice and most overtly critique racial, sexual, economic, and political systems of oppression. Many of these poems evince the literary influences of the Nuyorican poets, like Sandra Maria Esteves and Pedro Pietri, and of her contemporaries, such as Martín Espada; they also echo the ideologies of U.S. feminists of color, such as Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa by transforming "silence into language and action" (Lorde) and by claiming the multiple voices of one's identity (Anzaldúa). "Poetics of History and Memory" examines the

poems in which Ayala demonstrates the ongoing influence of history, whether personal, national, or global, in shaping the present and where she espouses the significance of active remembering as a tool for justice and survival. In “Songs of Female Identity” I explore how Ayala’s poetry posits a complex Puerto Rican female identity that challenges gender norms and expectations for Latina women and finds liberation through an understanding of and connection with the earth. In both of her collections, her verses continually emphasize an intimate connection with landscape, and evoke the desire for a harmonious relationship with the environment. Through metaphors and images rooted in nature, she reminds her readers of humanity’s interdependence with the earth and acknowledges both its destructive and creative qualities.

Ayala’s connection to the land is rooted in her upbringing on the island, where she lived until she was fourteen. As a teenager she visited her aunt in New Haven, Connecticut[22] and decided to stay to finish high school; she also became determined to write as fluently in English as she did in Spanish. (Chamberlain CN8). At Wheaton College Ayala experienced first-hand the discrimination she writes about in poems such as “What Am I?” and “Statement”; she left after one year with the goal of educating herself and focusing on her writing. She returned to New Haven and became involved with the activist community (Marquez 467) as well as the local arts community, where she worked as the coordinator of New Haven's Inner City Cultural Development Program, organized the city's first International Festival of Arts and Ideas, designed the 'Words Alive' project for area schools, and founded the New Haven Alliance for the Arts (Literature Online). In her writing life, she found mentors in the Latina/o community,

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[22] Ayala was actually born in New Haven in 1964, but her family moved back to Puerto Rico when she was less than two years old (Aragón 4).

began to give readings at schools, libraries, and cultural centers, and "by the mid-1990s … had firmly established herself as a local poet and arts activist, teaching poetry at Coop High School and the nearby women's prison in Niantic, as well as serving as a master teaching artist with the Connecticut Commission on the Arts" (Literature Online). In 1997 she published her first collection of poetry, *Wild Animals on the Moon*, which New York City Public Library named as one of the year's Best Books for the Teen Age in 1999, and she published her second collection of poetry, *This Side of Early*, in 2008.

Words of Defiance

In "Immigrant's Voice," the opening poem in her first collection, Ayala establishes the tone of resistance she employs, to varying degrees, throughout her work; the poem also demonstrates how her verses testify to the injustices that immigrants and people of color experience in the United States. In using the word "testify" I am drawing on Shoshana Felman's theorization of "literature of testimony," which she views as "an art of urgency" (114). While Felman's theory and examples are based in the historical trauma of the Holocaust, her ideas regarding the ability of art to bear witness to and "rethink" (95) history are useful in examining literature that emerges out of and addresses other traumas, such as colonialism, displacement, and repeated oppression. Felman explains, "to bear witness is to take responsibility for truth," on which she elaborates:

> To testify…is more than simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded, and remembered. Memory is conjured here essentially in order to *address* another, to impress upon a listener, to *appeal* to a community. To testify is always, metaphorically, to take the witness stand…To testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative to others: to

> *take responsibility* – in speech – for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal, in having general (nonpersonal) validity and consequences. (204)

In "Immigrant's Voice" and "A Mighty Servant Who Never Sleeps" Ayala testifies to the struggles of working class immigrant life, critiques the promise of the American Dream, and "appeals" to the reader to understand the consequences of continued oppression. In the first poem, which begins "I heard an immigrant's voice" (1), Ayala chronicles the hardship and disillusionment immigrants repeatedly face while trying to earn an honest living. One of the most striking characteristics is the fact that the "immigrant's voice" (1) the speaker hears remains unidentified and referred to as "it" (2) throughout most of the poem. This lack of subjectivity is both unsettling and powerful. By not providing a specific name or personal history to this "voice," who seems to blend into the "walls of downtown / buildings" it scrubs "clean" (2-3), Ayala draws even more attention to its anonymity and makes us painfully aware of the dearth of information we have about this, and countless other, immigrants. Does the "voice" belong to a man or a woman? What country did they emigrate from and why? Are they a political exile or religious refugee?

Ayala's rhetorical choice of an unnamed subject serves multiple purposes: by not providing more specific information about this person, she emphasizes the obscurity immigrants often experience in the U.S. because of how society perceives and treats them. This disembodied voice, then, signifies how immigrants and the physical labor they perform go unacknowledged by the majority of society on a daily basis. Alternatively, when immigrants do become the subject of discussion, namely by the government and the media, they are treated all too often as a "problem" and lumped into

a homogenous group, which further serves to dismiss their individuality. Finally, by not providing a name or even identifying this person's country of origin this subject takes on a collective identity and represents all immigrants in the United States who are overworked, underpaid, and unacknowledged by society at large.

As the poem progresses, the subject climbs a "flagless pole" and recites the well-known phrase on the one-dollar bill, "*e pluribus unum e pluribus unum*" (10, 13). By italicizing this phrase, which translates as "out of many, one," Ayala emphasizes the ideology of inclusion the U.S. officially espouses in its legal documents and tender but does not necessarily put into practice in everyday life. The image of the immigrant climbing a pole without a flag reinforces this false promise of acceptance and prosperity; even though the immigrant works hard, there is no flag, or American Dream, at the top. Moreover, the immigrant who "cut[s] open its forearm six inches / at his machine operator's job / cutting steel – " (20-22) does not have the same access to a safe working environment as those who work white-collar or executive jobs. Although the immigrant assumes a male identity in these lines, it is only a temporary assignation; in the remainder of the poem, Ayala continues her use of the pronoun "it," further reinforcing her portrayal of a collective immigrant experience. There are only three lines in the poem where Ayala utilizes italics, which serves to connect the phrases and ideas within them. In addition to the line above, she also employs italics in the fourth stanza:

> It pounded on its lover's breast,
>
> this voice
>
> demanding *where* is the dream?
>
> Where *is* the dream? (26-29)

The poet's strategic use of italics in these stanzas emphasizes the immigrant's false hope and accompanying disillusionment, and underscores how the poem functions as a critique of the American Dream. In the second stanza, the images lend a tone of cautious hopefulness: the immigrant's voice "cleared a fog in January" (8) and is portrayed as climbing up. The word "cleared" has connotations of being free from something that obscures and climbing indicates ascendancy. The repetition of the motto twice indicates that the immigrant is trying to convince himself to believe in the principle of equality advocated in American political discourse. However, the "land of opportunity" fails to deliver on its promise when the immigrant is forced to beg at "city hall" with "… kneecaps to concrete / during unemployment – " (16-17). Ayala's image here of a fragile part of the body colliding with the hard surface of concrete emphasizes the brutality and bitterness that accompanies joblessness. The inkling of hope to be included in the American family disappears as the immigrant finds himself on the margins of society begging for " … a dollar, a mighty dollar" (19). The dollar reappears here, and serves to reinforce the disparity between the rhetoric of inclusion and prosperity the dollar (and thereby the U.S. government) promises and the reality of exclusion, joblessness, and poverty immigrants often experience. Like Espada's poem, "Alabanza," which also highlights the working class struggles of immigrants, Ayala makes visible and impresses upon the reader the physical labor and psychological strife that accompanies the collective immigrant experience. She revisits these themes, albeit through a different lens, in "A Mighty Servant Who Never Sleeps," which loosely resembles Pedro Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary" and is now considered one of the signature poems of the Nuyorican movement.

Just as Pietri depicts a collective Puerto Rican experience of labor abuse, poverty, and disillusionment, Ayala testifies to the grueling working conditions in the steel plant where the speaker's father and Jorge work "doubleovertime," experience "insufferable / tendonitis" (63, 74-75), and still live in poverty. This poem most clearly shows the influence of the Nuyorican style of poetry through its use of short, enjambed lines, repetition, and lack of punctuation; these devices, combined with the italicization of the only Spanish word in the poem, "*siempre*" ("always"), emphasize the cycles of exploitation and poverty that all too many Latino/as struggle with on a daily basis and to which Ayala bears witness. In lines that evoke Pietri's repetition of phrases, such as "they worked" and "all died yesterday today" ("Puerto Rican Obituary"), Ayala introduces the characters' plight in succinct but powerful words:

> They live two blocks
>
> from the plant
>
> Jorge's tired
>
> *siempre*
>
> Dad's in pain
>
> *siempre*
>
> ……………….
>
> Milagros is afraid
>
> because
>
> her children are…. (6-11, 17-19)

Near the middle of the poem, the point of view of transitions from third to first person when the speaker discusses the need for her father to work right "before Christmas" (61)

and says "I despised / his dedication" (64-65). Here and in subsequent lines, Ayala demonstrates how labor exploitation not only affects the workers negatively, but also leaves lasting "scars" (73) on the family and fragments communities. While the speaker's family receives disability "checks" (86) because "the steel / industry / …. / broke" (66-67, 69) her father's back,

> … Jorge's still waiting
>
> *siempre*
>
> through doubleover time
>
> with Milagros
>
> two towns away
>
> from this one. (87-92)

In both "Immigrant's Voice" and "A Mighty Servant" Ayala questions the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality by challenging the notion that immigrants and Latino/as in the United States have access to the same resources as citizens of the working and middle classes and must simply work hard in order to succeed. Despite a willingness to work multiple jobs and even subject oneself to bodily harm to make a living, immigrants remain both literally and figuratively out in the cold:

> [It] crawled shivering into its sleep.
>
> What sleep there could be.
>
> What dreams. ("Immigrant's Voice" 37-39)

In these last two lines of this poem Ayala revisits the image of the sleep-deprived immigrant depicted in the first stanza and reinforces her reproach of the American Dream.

While the previous two poems illustrate immigrants' marginalization in American society, the poems "Statement" and "What Am I?" testify to the unjust discrimination and oppression Latina women experience, including at the hands of law enforcement. They also echo Audre Lorde's conception of the role of poetry in women's lives. In her essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Lorde argues that poetry enables women to articulate their realities and also endows them with ongoing strength to persevere through hardship. She views poetry "as a revelatory distillation of experience" and declares:

> For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (37)

The poem "Statement" distills the story of a Latina woman's experience with racism and harassment by a police officer, and exemplifies how the poetic word performs resistance. As the title suggests, the art form takes on the function of an official "statement" – a declaration of events that occurred and injustices committed – since the speaker is prohibited from filing "an official complaint" (61) about her encounter with the "cop" (1). Through the medium of the poem, then, Ayala attests to *and* protests against the racial profiling of Latina/os by law enforcement that continues to occur in cities throughout the United States. Through repetition and imagery, Ayala transforms the theoretical concept of racial profiling that typically occurs in public (on a street in this particular poem), into a tangible and deeply personal incident that is experienced within

the body. Ayala also demonstrates the bodily experience of racism and internalized oppression in "What Am I?" where the speaker claims, "The tender marrow / inside my bones / remembers" the "names" (19-21, 22) and epithets she has been called throughout her lifetime.

In "Statement" a police officer in a car questions the speaker's legitimacy "in the neighborhood" and yells at her, "Latina! Aren't you?" (28, 25). The speaker's physical appearance, which the police officer equates with her ethnic background, forms the officer's basis for suspicion and his justification for "questioning" (27); she views his behavior as aggressive, signified by the repetition of the phrase "the cop who tried to hustle / me" (1-2). The speaker experiences her encounter with the police officer as a form of sexualized violence, and one that she likens in the last stanza to the type of personal violation that rape entails. She says she was "open like a child" (11) while riding her bicycle down the street, which casts the officer's sexualized and threatening behavior as even more disturbing and inappropriate. Ayala writes:

> Leaving the patrol car,
>
> his hand moved to handle the gun
>
> in his holster the way a cock
>
> is handled like a gun – (29-32)

Ayala's use of consonance (with the letter "h") in these lines evokes the sound of huffing, or heavy breathing, which can be associated with anger (on the part of the cop), fear (on the part of the speaker), and even the act of sex. The repetition of the "h" sound intensifies the cop's movement in reaching for his gun and adds to the suspense of the moment, which the dash at the end of line thirty-two also amplifies. Even though the cop

“perceive[s]” her as weak and vulnerable – “my small body like a frail branch / one that invited to be cut / from the landscape” (14-18) – he still threatens violence, which for the speaker, becomes conflated with a performance of violent masculinity.

Ultimately, Ayala’s poem draws attention to the issue of silence that often follows from trauma and oppression. In the final lines, the speaker indicates the shame and fear that accompanies personal violation:

> For weeks I was ashamed,
>
> the way the raped are first ashamed
>
> and silent. (63-65)

As Ayala indicates, shame contributes to the speaker’s initial silence; however, another powerful reason lies in the fact that victims of this oppression can “not make / an official complaint” (61). Here Ayala points to the lack of recourse to justice for those who are victimized by the law enforcement system. By ending the poem with the word “silent,” Ayala emphasizes that silence surrounding racial profiling and discrimination will continue to occur if victims and witnesses do not testify to the injustices committed. The poem as a whole, then, enacts Audre Lorde’s call to “transform[] silence into language and action” and “to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding” (“Transformation” 43). The speaker does not remain silent regarding the racism and harassment she experiences, exemplified by the poem she speaks; in this way Ayala demonstrates how “one must *survive* in order to bear witness, and one must bear witness in order to affirm one’s survival” (Felman 117).

While “Statement” examines and denounces the public discrimination Latina/os experience, “What Am I?” explores the implications of this discrimination on the

conception of personal identity. By exploring identity as it is constructed through the speaker's and society's uses of language, the poem critiques race relations in the United States and ultimately posits a conception of self located outside of the black/white binary that dominates American identity politics. The poem is also an intertextual dialogue with Sandra Maria Esteves' poem, "Not Neither," in which Esteves asks "Pero ni que, what am I?" (6) in an "attempt[] to reconcile the different cultural, linguistic, and racial components of her fragmented identity" (Acosta Belen). Like Esteves, Ayala explores her multifaceted identity as a Puerto Rican woman residing in the United States and the accompanying subordination that often entails. Ayala's poetic challenge to form – structuring the poem in short, one-to-three word lines, subverting conventional grammar rules, and employing irregular line breaks – mirrors her challenge to ideological constructions of race and identity in the United States, and her experimentation with the boundaries and possibilities of language demonstrate it to be both a destructive and creative tool. She begins the poem with the question Esteves raises, but adds a specific geopolitical context:

> What am I
> in White
> america? (1-3)

Ayala's use of the word "what" instead of the pronoun "who" in relation to identity construction already suggests that the speaker's experience in "White america" involves a lack of individuality or subjectivity (a continuation of a theme from "Immigrant's Voice") and, hence, lacks power. By capitalizing "White" rather than "america" Ayala subverts conventional grammar rules and draws attention to the issue of race and colonial

subordination that continues to be a reality for Puerto Ricans both on the island and the mainland. This rhetorical choice serves multiple purposes: it acknowledges *and* emphasizes the power of race in the United States and the authority that "whiteness" bestows; it also serves as a way for the poet to destabilize the power ascribed to the U.S., particularly in terms of its status as an inclusive, multicultural society, which is a concept Ayala repeatedly challenges in her poems.

Before rejecting the words and labels others use to oppress, Ayala demonstrates how the speaker is positioned (by others) on the margins of society. She asserts that she is treated as

> A word
>
> mis-
>
> pronounced & beaten
>
> down (4-7)

and is also relegated to

> A name
>
> out
>
> of any
>
> kind of un-
>
> union. (14-17)

In these lines, the words "out" and "un-union" indicate the speaker's position outside of and apart from society. The word "union" evokes the phrase "to form a more perfect union" from the Constitution; however, Ayala negates this connotation with the use of the prefix "un" in the preceding line, which serves to emphasize the problematic ideology of

inclusion. In this speaker's experience, the ethnic subject does not enjoy full participation in the union, but rather is "beaten / down / each / time / by a / different / new / name" (6-13). Here, Ayala emphasizes the destructive power of language, as the speaker equates her treatment with repeated physical violence. Ayala reinforces the theme of exclusion and inferiority with the lines,

> You who make me
>
> a tenement
>
> language
>
> inside your white
>
> walls, (23-27)

Ayala's strategic use of the word tenement as an adjective rather than a noun enables her to create a powerful image of inferiority; all of the connotations of the word "tenement," such as dirty, substandard, and undesirable, become intertwined with both the speaker's identity and language. Ayala is one among several Puerto Rican and Latina authors who have written about their experiences with linguistic discrimination and society's attempted suppression of their native tongue. One of the first Latinas to speak out against this was Gloria Anzaldúa, whose groundbreaking work, *Borderlands/La Frontera*: *A New Mestiza*, argues for the validation of all the languages she speaks, as well as her use of code-switching. She explains how Chicanas "have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language…we are told that our language is wrong" (80); however, Anzaldua challenges this internalized oppression throughout the text and introduces the idea that

> ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself…I will no longer be made to feel ashamed for existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue – my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence. (81)

Just as in "Statement," this poem demonstrates how the speaker overcomes silence by speaking her experience and embracing her voice.

As a whole, Ayala's poem seeks to break down the "walls" (27) or the borders that re-inscribe artificial and simplistic notions of identity. Instead, she posits a more existential notion of self:

> So praise
> being! I am myself
> outside your words. (40-42)

Because Ayala breaks the line before completing the sentence, she connects the words "being" and "myself" with one another, which underscores her notion of identity as grounded in lived experience and conscious awareness rather than tied to a physical marker of appearance. Once again, Ayala's formal technique underpins her thematic concerns; her irregular line break reinforces her nonconformist position and resistance to conventional definitions of identity. These lines also signal a change in tone. Her use of the exclamation point, the word "praise," and an affirmative declaration of self indicate a rhetorical shift from denouncement to affirmation; she transitions from demonstrating the power of words to subjugate to emphasizing the power of language as a tool to resist oppression and imagine alternative realities. When she claims, "Praise any new word"

(43), she celebrates the boundless potential of language as a creative rather than destructive force, which she explores in greater detail in the next poem.

The very title of the poem "A Coqui in Nueva York" draws attention to language by employing code-switching to convey the effects of colonialism and posit a transnational identity predicated on movement. In calling herself "a loud mouth coqui" (1), which is the native, singing frog of Puerto Rico, the speaker establishes herself as a dislocated Puerto Rican who "broke out from the island / because the yanquis / were crowding the place" (2-4). Throughout the poem, Ayala draws attention to the effects of U.S. colonialism on Puerto Rican culture and identity, specifically during Operation Bootstrap in the 1950s, which transformed the economy from an agricultural to an industrial one and deprived thousands of farmers of their means of living. She notes how the "yanquis," or American Yankees, unabashedly destroyed the revered island's rainforest, "El Yunque," for industry and "their economic dreams" (3, 5, 15) of profit. She critiques America's false promise of economic prosperity through an industrialization process that did not benefit the Puerto Rican people because "paper products could [not] feed / the eyes or fill the lungs" (6-7). While manufacturing may contribute to the Puerto Rican economy, it cannot fill the void resulting from the destruction of the island's natural habitats and the life-giving qualities it supplies. In addition to denouncing the economic consequences of colonialism, Ayala also highlights the socio-cultural effects of the "Americanization" campaign, which "sought to replace Spanish institutions" (Morris 24) with American ones through attempts to regulate the school curriculum, national language, and cultural traditions. They imposed English as the language of administration and instruction, and in the schools substituted Spanish-

language textbooks with American English language texts (Malavet 115). Ayala assails this practice, which she describes as "eating broken English anthems / for breakfast at school" (10-11) that the Americans claimed was "wonderful / & necessary" (12-13).

Before migrating to New York, the speaker feels powerless in the face of U.S. imperialism; she hopes to "sing of my green onlyness" (line 24), or to voice a single ("only") Puerto Rican ("green") identity, yet this possibility diminishes as the colonial practices of the U.S. transform her culture, forcing her to "shov[e] my song / deep into the fat briefcases / of their intentions" (16-18). Rather than submit to this colonial subjectivity, she decides to "brave[] it to Nueva York with an attitude" to "invade the land of freedom with songs" (25, 27). Just as the U.S. has "invaded" Puerto Rico, the speaker marches into the U.S. with "an attitude" to "sing where I wanted to" (25, 26). She desires to create "songs that drew people, made them move / toward the dance of action" (29-30). While she hopes her songs will promote transformation, she also utilizes her art to convert "the garbage of nightmares / into fine, fine food" (32-33). Here, she refers back to the rotting and stinking garbage (referred to in line 21) of American colonial practices on the island that remain embedded in the Puerto Rican psyche even after migration. Through her art, then, Ayala enacts resistance to internalized colonial oppression and creates strength to confront the obstacles she faces in the diaspora, such as "the tall buildings of frustration" (37). To accomplish this, Ayala trains her new song, or new voice and identity, to "live on air" (34), suggesting she must employ new methods to assert herself and to continually adapt her identity within different social contexts. While this "air" signifies the new atmosphere of the United States, it also recalls the air of the rainforest in Puerto Rico that "fills the lungs" (7) of its people and enables them to

retain their sense of Puerto Rican-ness. Like other Puerto Ricans have done for decades, Ayala acknowledges the necessity of learning "to leap" (35) and cross boundaries in order to accommodate her shifting, transnational identity in the U.S. In fact, Ayala indicates that it is precisely because of her circular migration, which she describes as "back home & forth… / there & here" (39, 42), that she remains "alive today" (43). Moreover, she maintains that her repeated movement across geographic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries enables her "song" to "multiply / & multiply" (40-41), thereby suggesting a manifold identity that draws on both cultures rather than a fragmented one. She reinforces this multiplicity through her use of the ampersand – a more powerful image of combination than the use of a conjunction – five times within the last eight lines. Indeed, the ampersand is a signature feature of Ayala's writing that appears frequently throughout her two collections; her use of this symbol also signifies opposition, as she rejects the slash commonly used by other Puerto Rican writers and its accompanying associations of fragmentation. This rhetorical choice signals her desire to articulate a multifaceted and unified, not disjointed, sense of self. This urge takes on greater force throughout her oeuvre, and it is through a conscious awareness of her relationship to her local environment, her history, and the earth that she begins to arrive at this identity.

Poetics of History and Memory

Like the works of other Puerto Rican, Caribbean, and African American writers, Ayala's poetry underscores the necessity of remembering and re-visioning one's history in order to understand one's sense of self and experience in the world. According to Carmen Dolores Hernandez, a focus on history and memory underlies much Puerto Rican

writing since it is “an affirmation of individual and collective survival. It is born of the pressure to keep on being distinct, to record the life of a forgotten community, marginalized within a host country that has refused to take into account its particular experience within its accepted repertory of images” (8). Puerto Rican writer Liza Fiol-Matta explains how this appropriation and documentation often constitutes an act of resistance: “writing at the beginning of the century of colonization by the United States, I must still struggle to reappropriate my history and take back the power to define myself” (121). According to Edward Said, this struggle to “reappropriate” or reconstruct one’s history is a central part of the project of cultural decolonization, which he views as “an effort at the restoration of community and repossession of culture” (213). This “restoration” often relies on the process of memory and the re-envisioning of history, which are not mutually exclusive acts, from perspectives that have been traditionally marginalized from dominant historical and cultural narratives.

There has been an increase of scholarly attention across a wide range of fields to studies of memory and the connection between history and memory. Literary and cultural studies have actively participated in this work, with scholars producing innovative research that examines the ways writers, particularly ethnic writers, grapple with conveying the process of memory; the research also investigates how this process inherently shapes the identities and histories of the communities the authors write about. Theorists who view memory as a process inform my understanding of the ways in which memory operates in Ayala’s verse. For example, Alessandro Portelli posits that memory should be understood as “an active process by which meanings are created” (qtd in Sugiman 72), and in a similar vein, Singh, Skerrett, and Hogan believe both collective

and individual memory are “a function, not an entity” (17). Throughout her poetry, Ayala demonstrates the act of memory as integral to her search for identity and emphasizes the power of active remembrance as a tool of justice and survival. In her article, “Narrating Memory,” Terry DeHay claims that literature by ethnic women writers in particular emphasizes the role of memory in identity formation and that “by providing openings for other narratives, other versions of history, these texts lead to a revisioning or ‘re-membering’…of minority women’s identities” (28). Many of these women writers, such as Toni Morrison and Aurora Levins Morales, have expressed similar ideas regarding history and memory and their theorizations, embedded throughout this section, also help illuminate Ayala’s verse.

Like Morrison’s and Levins Morales’s, Ayala’s writing provides a deep exploration of the workings of memory; several of her poems demonstrate the pervasive spirit of her ancestors and how history – personal, national, and global – remains embedded in both our personal and collective consciousness and shapes our lives. In poems such as “Amber Hands,” Cada Vez,” “Every Throat,” “Fifteen-Ten,” and “Wild Animals on the Moon,” Ayala utilizes the process of memory to reclaim her homeland and thereby recreate a communal history, a key aspect of cultural decolonization. She engages in the political act of re-constructing and re-envisioning historical events, particularly from the perspective of those placed on the margins; her poems, then, function as a counterpoint to “official” histories and embody resistance by “*writing back* to the metropolitan cultures” (Said 216) with alternative narratives.

In “Amber Hands” Ayala draws on her personal history and memories of Puerto Rico in order to create a narrative of self-identity and communal history that incorporates

the speaker's relationship with her "*abuela*" and "*abuelo*" (4, 8) and by extension the island community, who sustain her when she is "homesick in america" (1). Throughout the poem she utilizes code-switching, repetition, and cultural signifiers to articulate the strong connection she maintains with both her homeland and her grandparents, from whom she inherits her love for and understanding of the land. In recalling details about the summer she leaves "home" (41) the speaker addresses her grandparents directly, as if in conversation with them, thereby demonstrating memory as a "function" or an active process rather than a static "entity" (Singh, Skerrett, and Hogan). She remembers her "*abuela's* / tobacco-picking fingers" (4-5) and

> You, *abuelo* Juan, always
>
> *duro, fuerte* –
>
> ……………………………
>
> riding your bicycle into market
>
> for your *viandas*, me on the back. (8-9, 12-13)

Her use of the present and present continuous tense, here and throughout the poem, underscores the contiguity between her past and present, and her repetition of the phrase "that summer I am leaving" (3) illustrates how the process of migration remains embedded in her present consciousness. She repeatedly describes her grandfather, and ultimately herself, as "*duro, fuerte*" ("hard, strong") and tells him "You built my inheritance / with your amber hands" (21-22); within the poem she describes the manual labor both of her grandparents perform and their intimate connection with the land (boiling leaves and flowers "down for *purgante* / medicine" 24-25), thereby identifying and honoring the working class background that she inherits and that informs her sense of

self. The Puerto Rican people's long history with and connection to the earth (as a source of food, medicine, inspiration, and spirituality) becomes disrupted with the onset of Spanish colonialism and intensifies with U.S. industrialization and modernization of the island in the first half of the twentieth-century. Ayala laments the destruction of the island's natural habitats as a result of this modernization and criticizes the accompanying commercialization where "fastfood joints jam the outskirts / of rainforest, where neon ambition robs / the ancestral graves / of the home-spirit" (28-31).

Although her grandparents are "skeptical" (15) of the U.S. and her immigration, the speaker carries their spirit with her, for she believes they are "*siempre / conmigo* / and I, here, always with you" (18-20). In these lines, Ayala utilizes code-switching to reflect and embrace a bilingual and bicultural identity. In addition, the structure of the lines demonstrates what Antonia Miguela calls "tropicalization," which "consists of the manipulation of English so that it becomes impregnated by a cultural and linguistic Latino substratum" (4). According to Miguela, literary tropicalizations take many forms: manipulating English signifiers so that the rhythm of Spanish is translated into English, using literal translations that demonstrate "the English language as the site of cultural transformations and influence" because it shows "a strong influence of the underlying Spanish," and "cultural items that literally invade the American world" (5). Rather than writing the lines above completely in Spanish, which would read "*siempre / conmigo / y yo, aqui, siempre contigo*," Ayala employs a literal translation – "always with you" – that indicates the underlying Spanish of the phrase "siempre contigo." By employing tropicalization, Ayala underscores the importance of her native language and also

demonstrates how the interplay between the two languages she speaks is integral to her articulation of self.

In addition to manipulating language, Miguela argues that, "tropicalization … functions as a strategy of resistance and affirmation at the same time" (2). Ayala also uses this technique in the fifth stanza where the speaker resists the consumer culture of the U.S. through an affirmation of her cultural roots. She assures her grandfather that her heritage will always be in the forefront of her life, regardless of promises of wealth and convenient commodities in the U.S.; she tells him, "nothing… / … / could filter through the plantain / stain of my hand" (32, 37-38). Here, Ayala alludes to "la mancha del plátano," a common saying in Puerto Rico that refers to the mark, or "stain," the plantain plant leaves on one's hands. It has been used derogatorily in the past, but has been reclaimed as source of cultural pride. According to Miguel Luciano, the saying

> is embedded with vernacular references to race and class. For example, plantation workers could be identified by the notorious stains that harvesting plantains left upon their skin and clothing. La mancha del plátano, or the stain of the plantain has long been a euphemism that refers to skin color, equating blackness to a stain upon skin or culture. However, the expression's meaning is often inverted when used colloquially, as an assertion of pride of ones roots. Plátano references were also applied to Puerto Rican and Dominican immigrants in New York who had "just arrived" and struggled to assimilate.

Ayala not only alludes to a popular cultural signifier with the incorporation of this phrase, but more importantly, she identifies herself with a specific class in Puerto Rican society whose bodies and histories have endured oppression from both the colonizers and neo-

colonizers, or the wealthy elites of the island; in opposition to this subjugation, Ayala's poem exemplifies a counterpoint to the colonizer's history. By focusing on the lives and labor of field workers, whose daily oppression, poverty, and eventual loss of livelihood has been ignored in the colonizer's narrative, Ayala participates in cultural decolonization. In the final stanza, the poet reinforces the continuity between the past and the present, the island and the mainland. The speaker tells her "*abuelo*" (55) that she knows they "feel" each other's "spirit" (58, 55) and declares, "There is no distance. / There is no *charco*" (60-61). Ayala not only ends the poem in Spanish but also refers to the phrase, "bricando el charco," that literally means "jumping across the pond" and that is "popularly used in Puerto Rico to connote traveling, particularly to the U.S." (Blasini 199). Ayala's incorporation of this phrase signifies another instance of tropicalization and also refers to the geographic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries Puerto Ricans repeatedly cross when moving between the island and the mainland. While there may be a physical "distance" between her homeland and her place of residence, the speaker asserts there is no emotional distance, as her cultural "inheritance" (31) is always "*presente*" (59) and inextricable from her experiences in the United States; in this way, Ayala employs her poetry as a tool to resist the marginalization and erasure of her cultural heritage in the metropolis.

While Ayala acknowledges the ongoing presence of the previous generation in "Amber Hands," she reaches further back in time in "Cada Vez" ("Each Time") to remind the reader of the importance of remembering and honoring "the dead," (19) whose spirits, the speaker believes, remain with the living. The epigraph to the poem indicates that Ayala's Spanish title derives from a poem in Claribel Alegría's *Sorrow*, a

collection of love letters to her late husband expressing her grief and mourning in the wake of his death. Despite this intense emotional loss, Alegria believes, “Every time I name them my dead are resurrected” (Ayala *This Side* 64). Building on this idea, Ayala structures her poem as a conversation between two women who perform the routines of their deceased ancestors as a form of active remembrance. The speaker tells her companion, “We sit with the dead / in your kitchen, in mine” (8-9) and they remember their younger days with their loved ones. More important than the act of remembering, though, are the daily habits of their relatives that they perpetuate. The speaker “make[s] white rice and fried eggs / for Baba because Baba made these” (6-7) and performs the task “as if these were her hands” (5). The speaker’s friend, who fries sardines “to eat with Wilfredo,” who perhaps is her late husband, “say[s], *They are here*” (10). These actions, then, are done not only to honor the traditions of the deceased, but also as a way of establishing a sense of continuity between the living and the dead, the past and the present. In her widely influential essay, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison discusses the role of ancestral figures in literature and posits that ancestors “are a sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom…if you kill the ancestor you kill yourself” (62). As they do for Morrison, ancestors figure as a prominent force in Ayala’s poetry and they necessarily inform one’s present consciousness, for she believes “we … / sign our days with names” (21).

Ayala continues her journey further into history with “Every Throat” and “Fifteen-Ten,” in which she relays the suffering and resilience of more distant ancestors whose stories have been relegated to the margins of history: those who labored in the

tobacco fields in Puerto Rico in the former poem, and those who endured enslavement in the latter. Through repeated images of darkness – "dark water" lapping "at the bank" (3) of the river and "the dark sky" (16) overhead – Ayala establishes a melancholy mood in "Every Throat" that reflects the bleak living conditions of the "*tabaqueras*" (5) ("female tobacco workers") and their descendants. The speaker relates how her "*abuelo*" ("grandfather") teaches her "the way of the river" (9) and passes on important historical information about the land on which they live. He points out the "fields" (7) where the *tabaqueras* labored both day and night and relates how they suffered from "cancered mouths and throats" (8) since it was often their job to "remove the stems of the tobacco leaves with their teeth" (Ayala *This Side* 64). According to Altagracia Ortiz, "between 1898 to 1940 women workers in Puerto Rico…work[ed] for American businesses (mainly tobacco and garment)…under dire work conditions for miserable wages" (23). While historians have written about the economic and social consequences as result of slave and low-wage labor, the personal effects it had on individuals is rarely discussed in historical accounts. Through her poem, Ayala presents an "alternative way of conceiving of" (Said 216) this history and also gives it "a human face" (Espada qtd in Stavans 69). In this way, Ayala's poem engages in a similar project as her fellow puertorriqueña, Aurora Levins Morales, who also finds wisdom and strength in the women who came before her. In her book *Remedios*, she presents a history of the various women and cultures that have intersected in Puerto Rico; by interweaving their experiences with her own, she says "I created for myself the possibility of healing my own wounds as I explored the collective wounds of Puerto Rican women's oppression and the medicinal powers of history" (xxv).

Despite the poverty and physical pain the *tabaqueras* endure, they do not despair or lose hope; instead, they draw strength from their belief in "God" who "breathes in every throat" (19, 20) and from their relationship with the earth, which the grandfather reminds the speaker provides them with the

butterfish we have for breakfast

with day-old bread

and ripe plantain,

bitter coffee to remember

how we wear this skin that hurts. (22-26)

By teaching her how to fish and live off the resources still available, the speaker's grandfather passes on the historical knowledge of their ancestors as well as their tools for survival. Perhaps more importantly, he teaches her the significance of remembering her people's history – one of both pain and resilience – that she inherits and "wear[s]" (26).

Resilience and survival also feature as key themes in "Fifteen-Ten," in which Ayala illustrates both the personal and communal effects of slavery by constructing the poem as a dialogue between a Puerto Rican woman and a young female slave. Through her use of apostrophe and imagery, Ayala depicts the atrocities of slavery and reminds readers of its lasting psychological effects on communities and nations. Beneath the title, the poet explains that the number fifteen-ten refers to the year "*the native Taíno population dwindled*" and the "*first African slaves were brought by the Spaniards to the island of Borikén*" (*Wild Animals* 9). The poem begins:

you came to us a young woman

made to couple out back by the pens

with your brother (1-3)

In a condensed amount of space, Ayala powerfully conveys the horrors of slavery, including the treatment of human beings as animals (relegated to the "pens") who are forced into sexual and incestuous acts. The speaker tells the woman how the "guards" (4) look on to determine "whether you did it the same way / as they'd trained us to" (6-7). Here, Ayala alludes to how the "Spaniards made the Indians their principal instrument of labor" (Denis 14) when they first arrived in Puerto Rico, and also to the fact that many present day Puerto Ricans are descendants of slaves since they are a multiracial people derived from centuries of intermarriage among the Taino Indians, African slaves, and Spanish colonizers (Santiago xviii-xix). After detailing the inhumane treatment of the woman, her brother (who is "chained…to a pole"), and other slaves ("dragged face down in the dirt"), the speaker pronounces their shared suffering: "we, all of us / dying one limb at a time" (14-15). With this line, Ayala reminds readers how slavery caused the physical and psychological disintegration of both the individual and the community.

The remainder of the poem illustrates the slaves' resistance to this attempted destruction of community and their capacity to survive. Ayala shifts back to the use of first person to demonstrate the existence of personal relationships within this community:

today I remember you first,

your strong eye

meeting mine across a field. (16-18)

Several things are worth nothing here: the meeting of the two women's eyes as they work indicates an established relationship based on a communal experience of enslavement and suffering; the speaker characterizes the woman as "strong," and later as "hard," indicating

her resilience even in the face of "rape" (19); the speaker engages the process of memory to transition between the past and the present, signaling how the traumas of history continue to resonate in the present. The speaker laments that the young woman must bear a

> … child of pain
> in my home, sister,
> where it was supposed to be safe,
> where it was supposed to be love,
> meeting you, love. (21-25)

Whether "my home" refers to the speaker's physical house or the island of Puerto Rico, Ayala's poem clearly demonstrates how the introduction of slavery radically changed the culture of the island. Thus, Ayala's poem serves as an indictment of colonialism, which not only made slaves of the indigenous population but also irrevocably altered their societal structure and introduced the evils of racism. Denis remarks that with establishment of the slave system of production, "social classes were soon structured on the principle of the master-slave relationship" (16). While masters sought to demoralize and dehumanize slaves, the slaves demonstrated an immense resilience and capacity for survival; the speaker, herself a slave, indicates this resistance to dehumanization by ending the poem with the word "love," an expression of intense human feeling.

By reconstructing one of the most profound social injustices of the past from the perspective of a female slave, Ayala's poem allows for a rereading of Puerto Rican history that incorporates traditionally marginalized voices and experiences and also fosters a re-imagining of these women's identities. Her account stands in opposition to

hegemonic narratives by acknowledging rather than eliding the roots of systematic oppression against Puerto Rican women, which continues to affect their subjectivities, and for many, has a direct bearing on their place in society. The poem exemplifies how cultural memory bridges the past and the present (Sugiman 72) and is a necessity for both individual and collective identity formation. "Fifteen-Ten" underscores the importance of communal memory as a tool for social justice, and as Levins Morales does in *Remedios*, Ayala's poem demonstrates the desire to understand the nature of these injustices as well as the need to recover what was lost as result (Levins Morales xxvii).

Ayala reaches beyond the shores of Puerto Rico to examine other traumas of colonialism and war (this time in the Philippines) in the title poem of her first collection, "Wild Animals on the Moon." She explores the transnational history and collective memory of World War II through the story of an English teacher who experiences flashbacks to war while teaching "Cambodian, Laotian / Vietnamese / refugees" (17-19) how "to interview for jobs / in America" (24-25). Through the personification of rain, Ayala demonstrates how the past remains embedded not only in personal and national psyches, but also in the earth, which records the history of war, violence, and aggression against others. She introduces this concept in the first stanza with a "teacher" who

> Decides the chatter of rain
>
> inside the branches of a tree
>
> tells everything, is history
>
> talking back:
>
> The echo of bombs. Mindanao

dusk. Helicopter

blades cut sound, travel.

A moon.

red above the Philippines. (3-11)

Through sensory details (chatter, echo, sound) and nature imagery (rain, tree, dusk, moon), Ayala paints a picture of war in the Philippines during World War II and alludes to a surprise attack by the Japanese in Manila just a few hours after the bombing of Pearl Harbor (Dolan). In these stanzas and throughout the poem, Ayala varies the position of the lines, in no particular pattern, so that they zigzag across the page. The motion of the lines, then, echo the movement of the "helicopter" and the "Ferris wheel" and mirror the terrified movement of the victims on the ground, who run from the "fell swoop / of ammunition" (12-13). These images and sounds of war from the past flood the teacher's mind, and the "refugees he teaches" (19) become conflated with those he witnessed being killed as they "scatter beneath with ghosts / like fire on their backs" (20-21). By employing these techniques, Ayala not only recreates the historical scenes of destruction narrated in the poem but also intertwines them with the present to demonstrate their ongoing influence on the personal and national psyches of countless peoples.

Ayala reinforces this influence in the fifth stanza where the teacher witnesses the power history holds over "… a refugee / who can't forget …" (37) the trauma of war and who is "forever, counting wild / animals on the moon" (40-41). The reference to the moon here evokes the "red" (11) moon from stanza two and demonstrates the staying power of that image, which was likely a result of the smoke and dust particles left in the wake of the bombs. Although "many moons" (36) have passed since the war, the red one

remains embedded in the consciousness of this refugee, who can no longer see an untainted moon when he looks in the night sky; the "wild animals," then, seem to be a visual incarnation and ongoing reminder of the physical and psychological destruction, as well as dislocation, that stems from war. The epigraph, which comes from an Audre Lorde poem, also touches on this theme: "Second rule of the road: / any wound will stop / bleeding if you press / down hard enough" (*Wild Animals* 51). While the wound, or war, may "stop bleeding," or come to an end, the pain and suffering, as illustrated by the refugees, continue to radiate and have consequences in the present day.

Songs of Female Identity

While nature imagery and symbolism permeate most of Ayala's verses, the poems discussed in this section most poignantly demonstrate the poet's belief in humanity's interdependence with the environment and where she illustrates her connection with the earth as intertwined with her Puerto Rican heritage of resistance and integral to her sense of identity. In her poem, "You in the Me of I," which explores the interconnectedness of human beings, animals, and the earth, Ayala invites her readers to cultivate a strong understanding of the rhythms of the earth and to recognize how they relate to one's conception and articulation of self; she writes, "In song we are made real, / we breathe. / Know singing before words. / Know goatskin. / Know the drum of the tree" (38-41). As illustrated in these lines, "song" is often coupled with her metaphors and images rooted in nature, which suggests that the music Ayala hears in the natural world provides inspiration for her art and leads her to greater self-knowledge. Rather than merely celebrating the environment, however, Ayala highlights the power of the earth as both a

destructive and a creative force, and encourages readers to realize that the lessons of nature can teach them about themselves and about their relationships with one another.

In "Telling News of the Tainted Land: Environmental Justice Fiction by Women" Annie Merrill Ingram explains that environmental justice literature has expanded the canon of environmental literature and argues that "environmental justice literature is multicultural, emphasizes social justice, identifies "environment" as the inextricable combination of human culture and natural setting, and attends to issue of race, class, and gender as often as it acknowledges the influence of place" (228). The concerns and issues outlined here resonate with the themes and subjects in Ayala's poetry; in addition to writing poems that articulate a Puerto Rican feminist sensibility, then, Ayala also writes environmental justice poetry.

"El Yunque" tells the story of the speaker's coming of age and into an awareness of identity at "thirteen" (4) as both a woman and a writer, and she examines the relationship between the earth, her body, and her writing. In her interview with Francisco Aragon, Ayala relates that she grew up close to "El Yunque," the name for the national rainforest of Puerto Rico: "To me the rainforest was a place that we lived, outside of it, just next to it. I'm a water person and the rainforest is was like another wet place…the rainforest feels like a cocoon, like it just holds you and surrounds you, and that moisture itself feels like it's breathing *you*" (2). In the poem, she captures this notion of being encircled by the forest by describing it as a "womb of moist, rich earth" (3) where the speaker is nurtured and becomes inspired to write "songs that will learn / to swim up the river" (11-12). This image of songs swimming against the current illustrates how Ayala views her poems as ones that challenge the status quo and also how she understands her

writing process as intertwined with the language of the earth. Ayala believes that if one listens, the land has its own narrative to tell, for "the stones talk back" and the "slow rhythms of the earth / can be pulled up / with the gait of the feet" (16, 22-24). The speaker reinforces the symbiotic relationship between the earth, her body, and her writing with an image that coalesces all three of these: "wild flowers leave / the poems of their scent / on my thighs" (16-18). Knowing and embracing the earth, then, can lead one to greater self-knowledge, and offers new ways of being: "no matter how far I might travel" she says, " I dance there everyday, a winged-woman" (28, 27). In her concluding lines, Ayala presents us with an image of female identity that embraces movement and fluidity, and even transcends the limitations of the human body in possessing wings, which allow her to fly. It is through the process of artistic creation – dancing and writing – that she embodies and sustains her connection with her "*jibaro*" (9) ancestors and with the earth, and that she imagines new possibilities for liberation.

In "Race" and "Perfection" Ayala wrestles with the lingering effects of colonialism and proposes that reconnecting with the earth can help women overcome internalized oppression and the dichotomy of self that colonialism engenders. In *Gender and Colonialism*, Geraldine Moane discusses the danger of "internalized oppression" and its consequences, such as "self hatred, sense of inferiority, helplessness and despair, mutual distrust and hostility, and psychological distress and madness" (20). Despite this, Moane notes that those who are oppressed have developed methods for confronting internalized oppression. Gloria Anzaldua also examines the internal contradictions embedded in a "borderlands consciousness," which stems from the process of colonization and declares, "the new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for

contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity…she has a plural personality … Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else" (79). For Ayala, overcoming subjugation and the process of transformation stem from recognizing humanity's interdependence with the earth and cultivating stronger connections with it.

In "Race" Ayala examines these internal contradictions that result from colonization, and the speaker addresses her colonized self as way of confronting her own self hatred. She tells herself:

> you might be thinking
>
> I don't belong
>
> any place anymore than you do,
>
> so you push me around
>
> thinking you are pushing yourself around (11-15)

Although the title is "Race," Ayala demonstrates the complex interplay of gender, race, class, and nationality in one's conception of identity:

> In your eyes I am not a woman.
>
> You see me, my face square
>
> as La Plaza de San Germán,
>
> so square a place
>
> you feel you can walk
>
> through it any time you want (2-6)

In these opening lines, the speaker establishes a dichotomy of self, where a crucial aspect of identity is either denied ("not a woman") or repeatedly ("any time") ignored. The comparison of the speaker's face to the plaza in San Germán positions the individual in a

specific geographic location and also imbues her subjectivity with national and cultural significance, as San Germán is the second oldest city in Puerto Rico (and the third oldest in the United States). In the early decades of Spanish colonialism, the Spaniards divided the island into two jurisdictions, the northern (with Camparra, now San Juan, as the capital) and the southern, with San Germán as its capital. The city was founded in 1573 and officially named Nueva Villa de Salamanca; however, "the population refused to use this name and called the city San Germán el Nuevo (the New San Germán)" (M. Rivera). This historical act of defiance and self-naming bears significance to Ayala's poem, which engages with themes of displacement and self-identification that defies the colonizer's imposed designation as "other." While the colonial mentality suggests she is depraved and inferior, illustrated through the image of "the hungry / bastard pigeons of your solitude," (8-9) she rejects this characterization and proclaims,

> but I belong. I am whole,
> wholesome, every drop of sun
> inside my fruit. (11-18)

Line sixteeen represents a turning point in the poem as it articulates both defiance and affirmation, separated by the use of a period. With the conjunction "but" that begins the line, the speaker repudiates her designation as "other" and stakes her claim as a rightful inhabitant in her own land. Moreover, in the second half of the line, she declares herself a complete being that is nurtured by the "sun."

In the remainder of the poem, Ayala employs nature imagery to emphasize that connecting with the earth reestablishes the speaker's identity and offers possibilities for transformation. She writes, "I celebrate my clay-softening hands, / my island-country

song full of flowering / compost heaps where there should be graves" (20-23). By using environmental images to describe her "hands" and her "song," or voice, which are both essential to the act of writing poetry, she underscores that her true self stems from and seeks harmony with the natural world. These lines also evoke the composting of "garbage" into "fine, fine food" from the poem "A Coqui in Nueva York"; in "Race," it is death that is transformed into life, as the graves become sites of conversion and growth. In both poems Ayala highlights resistance as part of her cultural heritage and posits the transformative potential of song. Singing not only enables transformation in this poem but also provides the speaker with empowerment and a sense of continuity:

> Yes, me.
> I praise the power behind my song
> and my singing, behind where I've been
> and know I will be going.
>
> You might say I'm crazy
> singing like I do
> but my love is green, wild
> fields of *moriviví*
> beside you. (23-31)

In the logic of the poem, "song" and "singing" correspond to the speaker's voice, which she associates with her "love" in the final stanza; she then compares her love to "*moriviví*," which is an herb that grows wild in Puerto Rico. According to Levins Morales, *moriviví* is a "small plant with feathery leaves that fold together at the lightest

touch, who stems curl protectively in upon themselves" and it can be used medicinally; it is also called "the sensitive plant" and she believes it "means 'I died – I lived'" (18). Through a series of associations and comparisons, then, Ayala demonstrates identity as multifaceted and even paradoxical. While the herb/her love grows in abundance and without regard, it also protects itself from harm, particularly when threatened. This comparison signals the "contradictions" that are inherently part of colonial and postcolonial subjectivity. In the final lines, the speaker returns to addressing the side of her still struggling with colonial oppression, and she indicates how this part of herself exists alongside the part of her identity that exudes "love." By describing her love as "green" (a color associated with life and the earth) and "wild" (that has connotations of being both natural and powerful), she suggests that it is through love, which takes the form of singing, that one can begin to overcome oppression and feel empowered. Like the *moriviví* plant that grows "wild," Ayala seeks to overtake the psychological oppression of colonialism and she shares her tools of resistance and empowerment through her poetry.

In "Perfection," as in the previously discussed poem, Ayala examines the psychological and emotional effects of colonization and posits reconnection with the earth as empowering and liberating. The speaker addresses her "body" (1), which has been imprisoned by colonial religious ideology and lost touch with her "woman-song" (7). In an act of restoration, she says "I bring back your drum and forgive you, body" (1). Here, and throughout the poem, Ayala juxtaposes the rhetoric of Catholicism with a discourse that reflects the spiritual practices of her indigenous ancestors. The speaker contrasts the act of kneeling "to search for sin" (5) with "brewing shame like a back-

home tea / out of woman-song" (6-7); she then remarks how the "songbirds were put off" (13) while sitting in the "pews" on "Sunday mornings" (12), resulting in a loss of "the earth beneath your feet" (15). In a subversive positioning, the speaker takes on the role of a Catholic priest during the sacrament of confession. She "forgive[s]" (1) her body for adhering to the colonial ideology of Catholicism that espouses the female body as licentious and responsible for "endangering" one's "salvation" (4). At the end of a Catholic confession the priest gives his words of absolution, which include "I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." In the poem, the speaker tells herself "I release you of sin, / the laws used to yoke you" (8-9); by modifying the language of absolution in such a way she subverts the authority of the church. She further undermines its authority over her life and identity when she says "I release you from the colonialist's hymns" (10). By re-appropriating the language of the colonizer, she negates the church's message and frees herself from the ideologies that have been used to oppress her.

Because the church has taught her to view her body as dangerous and foreign, she views her own menstruation as a violation that she tries "to wash…off like rape" (18). She realizes, however, that she uses these "same hands" to "imitate the flight of birds, to speak a poem" (20-21). Here the speaker recognizes her female body as a site of creativity and empowerment and not just a vessel for childbearing. Ayala also touches on this theme in the poem "Twelve Days," where the speaker scoffs at a man who tells her that she is "the bearer of nations" (11) and she informs him that she is "trying to bear a different fruit / … / aiding the ailing / with new languages" (15, 17-18). Ayala's poems, then, reject the patriarchal nationalist discourse (with strong connections to Catholicism)

that consigns women to the role of mother and "bearer of nations." She does not reject the notion of women as agents of creation, but instead posits the female body as a site of multiple creations; this includes artistic and literary productions, which then become tools of empowerment and liberation. The speaker is "Saved" (the title of the second section of this collection) not through the authority of the Catholic Church, a patriarchal social system, but through the creative act of writing a poem and then speaking it; thus, her redemption springs from her own acts of creation: the written and spoken word. Ayala challenges the notion that to attain "perfection" Puerto Rican women must strictly adhere to the "laws" of the colonizer's religion; instead, she offers us an alternative representation of Puerto Rican spirituality and female identity that, while considered outside the norm for a Puerto Rican woman, is more in tune with her Taino ancestry and, therefore, with the earth.

Ayala cements this representation of female identity in "Barro" and "Crickets," the final poem of her second collection. In "Barro," which means mud or clay in Spanish, the poet reaches back to a time before Spanish colonization to recover the cultural practices and beliefs of her Taino ancestors and to articulate a communal and earth-centered female identity. The setting of the poem is "Caguana" (3), which archeologists believe was a communal place where Taino people from dispersed communities congregated to reinforce social bonds and religious identity, primarily by performing *areytos*, which were ceremonies that involved the whole community in dances, songs, and ancestor worship (Maestri). The poem begins with an invocation to "Caguana," which is also the name of the Taíno deity associated with fertility, and a recreation of the ritual of "squatting over hot / stones…" (3-4). Ayala explains that "the

reference to squatting over hot stones refers to the belief that pregnant Taíno women would do so to help them dilate when they neared the time of birthing" (*This Side* 64). After emerging into the world, the speaker tells us that she feeds her "*maíz* / soul along the banks / of my people's song" (9-11); here, the speaker illustrates how her spirit is intertwined with both the earth ("maiz" being the Taino word for corn) and the communal practices of her people. While the earth leaves its impression on her as "wild flowers" on her "thighs" ("El Yunque") in the first collection, in the second collection, she becomes one with the earth and all of her ancestors who have inhabited it:

> I am the river
>
> and the women
>
> who wash in it
>
> I am wind and *hurakán*
>
> scent of blood in the fields. (12-16)

Because she believes herself to be an extension of the earth, who is "born" from "cane and bamboo" (17, 18), which are "knocking, always knocking" (19), she possesses its strength and spirit of resistance. As she does in "What Am I?" Ayala employs short lines here that amplify the authoritative tone and statements the speaker makes regarding her identity.

Ayala's depiction of the earth as powerful and even capable of destruction in the final lines not only disrupts traditional Western views of the earth "as female and passive" (Fontana 55), but also challenges centuries of representations in Puerto Rican literature of the island as docile and female. Like Sandra Maria Esteves, Ayala rejects the "metaphor of the island as a young maiden" (C. Rivera 80) waiting to be rescued.

Carmen Rivera explains that Puerto Rican (mostly male) poets repeatedly employ the image of the "island/damsel await[ing] with docility to be rescued from violations suffered at the hands of masculine-gendered entities" (80). Ayala's final verses defy these characterizations:

> Fertile or not,
>
> I take up arms now.
>
> The earth is a woman
>
> who knows bow and arrow. (21-23)

Ultimately, Ayala depicts the island as a woman warrior who carves her own path. In addition, she offers us a more complex representation of female identity that is simultaneously "blessing and storm" (8) because she embraces and gathers energy from all four of the elements (fire, water, air, and earth). In resurrecting the Taino consciousness in this poem, Ayala suggests there are lessons to be learned from their worldview that have been lost from cultural memory, including a respect for the earth and an understanding of it as a force beyond our control and domination. Moreover, Ayala articulates a multifaceted female identity rooted in the communal bonds of her ancestors and that challenges stereotypical representations of Puerto Rican women; rather than a passive woman generally confined to the domestic realm, Ayala creates a female persona that not only possesses agency but also assumes the actions of a warrior, a realm typically inhabited by males.

In "Crickets," the concluding poem in *This Side of Early*, Ayala reaches beyond categories of gender, class, or nationality and instead identifies the speaker as a singing creature of the earth. She employs an inquisitive and humble tone in posing questions

about the fate of crickets "when the frost comes" (2), and the poem becomes a meditation on death and the afterlife. As frost signals the onset of winter, it is associated literally with the end of the growing season in the natural world and metaphorically with death in literature. Immersing herself in nature – "near the dark, / dark side of the woods" (10-11) – and listening to the crickets, whose "song quiets" (9) her, allows the speaker to reflect on the cycles of nature, as well as on her own life and mortality. She concludes:

> I think I want to be a cricket when I die –
>
> Singing among thousands,
>
> punctuating the air with song
>
> for those who visit with the night. (14-17)

Appropriately, Ayala chooses a creature that sings for one of her final images, which provides continuity with the motif of song and the act of singing that appear across both of her collections. In addition, her desire to be part of a community ("among thousands") reinforces her articulation of a collective identity or voice.

Given the multifaceted nature of crickets, Ayala's choice is significant for several other reasons. While a few cricket species "are major agricultural pests" (Huber, Moore, and Loher 41) and capable of serious destruction of crops, "their songs are generally perceived as pleasant" and, therefore, "they rank with butterflies and fireflies as insects to enjoy" (1). According to Huber, Moore and Loher, "in Western folklore, a cricket in the house is an omen of good or bad luck, but in Eastern cultures crickets have had a much more prominent role. In China and Japan crickets are actively sought and brought into the home as music-making pets, and in China, as pugilists" (40). While crickets produce harmonious sounds, it is worth noting that only male crickets sing, which seems to

represent an intentional blurring or defying of gender boundaries on the poet's part. In addition, there are different types of songs a cricket sings depending on the situation: "The most common cricket songs are the calling song, which attracts the female; the courtship, or mating, song, which induces the female to copulate; and the fighting chirp, which repels other males" ("Cricket"). Moreover, crickets undergo metamorphosis and also adapt to their local environment, as the pitch of their song changes depending on the air temperature: "There is a direct relationship between the rate of cricket chirps and temperature, with the rate increasing with increasing temperature" ("Cricket"). Thus, the cricket is also a symbol of transnational adaptation and resilience in Ayala's poem.

In this final poem, Ayala underscores the importance of leaving her mark in the world ("punctuating the air with song") and making her voice heard, even after death. The repetition of "s" sounds throughout the poem echoes the sound of crickets singing, and in the final two lines, the speaker proclaims, "I want to go where it is I go / and come back singing, always, somehow" (18-19). Although she is uncertain of what happens after death, she indicates a belief in some sort of rebirth or regeneration, which the word "always" reinforces. In describing the speaker as a cricket, which performs a vital "role in the cycling of nutrients in ecosystems," eventually becoming "food for vertebrate animals," (Capinera, Scott, and Walker 20) and whose life cycle corresponds to the seasons, Ayala posits a sense of self in tune with the cycles of nature and ultimately interdependent with the earth.

Just as crickets vary their song depending on the situation, Ayala employs different types of "songs" throughout her poetry collections to articulate her wide-ranging experiences and emotions as a Puerto Rican woman living in the United States. She

composes “songs” that denounce injustice, that emphasize the centrality of history and memory in people’s lives, and that author(ize) a liberated female identity in touch with the rhythms of the earth. As a migratory Puerto Rican woman who spent her childhood on the island but came of age as a writer in the United States, Ayala’s poetry is a discourse of synthesis that reflects diverse literary influences, such as e.e. cummings, Julia de Burgos, Sandra Maria Esteves, Martín Espada, Audre Lorde, and Ntozake Shange. In fact, the first women writers in English Ayala connected with were African American. She recalls the first time she encountered Nikki Giovanni and Ntozake Shange and remembers thinking, “It’s okay to write like this? It’s okay to write like you speak?...It’s alright to tell your truth?” (Aragon Interview 13). She explains that she identified with their use of language and viewed their writing as alive: “to me, they were the symbols of female realism…this stuff is earthy; it’s raw; it’s like sweat and musk; and something organic and breathing” (13). Ayala could be describing her own verses here, which move between interior and exterior landscapes, that overflow with the grim realities of racism and poverty, and also exude the beautiful mystery of nature. Her poetry articulates the joys and struggles of daily life, bears witness to injustice, and ultimately yearns for a more just and harmonious world.

Carmen Dolores Hernandez explains that Puerto Rican women writers in the 1970s were “doubly invisible, both because they came from a segment of society that had been marginalized by poverty and ignorance and also because their roles were circumscribed to the home by male dominance within their community” (10). She adds that many contemporary women writers mirror the same “complex issues involving race, gender, nationality, and migration” (10), and still seek to transcend the fixed positions

both Latino and mainstream U.S. culture have assigned them. By synthesizing multiple literary traditions and cultural practices, Ayala denounces oppressive social conditions and transcends her ascribed subject position by articulating a multifaceted female identity that challenges notions of nationalism and redefines what it means to be Puertorriqueña. Moreover, she creates a poetry of resilience and transformation that illuminates the complexity of the Puerto Rican experience and participates in the ongoing cultural decolonization of Puerto Rico.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

On December 13, 1998, Puerto Ricans participated in an island-wide referendum to decide on the island's future relationship with the United States (Negrón-Mutaner 1). The options on the ballot included those that have appeared on referenda of the last four decades: Independence, Associated Republic, Statehood, and Commonwealth. Due to a dispute the Popular Democratic Party (PDP) had over the wording of the status options (specifically that which defined "Commonwealth" status), they managed to add a fifth column identified as *ninguna de las anteriores* or "none of the above" (2). To the surprise of some, "none of the above" won the majority of the vote at 50.3%. As Frances Negrón-Mutaner explains, this outcome points to the complexity of the Puerto Rican experience as well as to the Puerto Rican people's desire to frame their future on their own terms and not on those defined by the U.S. Congress (2-3). Although some scholars were dismissive of the results, Negrón-Mutaner points out their significance:

> in supporting *ninguna de las anteriores*, some Puerto Ricans then appeared to be actively rejecting (or at least resenting) not only specific status alternatives as Rosselló [the pro-statehood governor] declared but also the way the status question was posed, the very idea that the U.S. Congress, Constitution, and/or local political parties could conceive of a single solution to address the complexity of Puerto Rican (trans)locations. (5)

Negrón-Mutaner explains that because Puerto Ricans possess a unique (or as some would claim, ambiguous) place within the nation, inquiries regarding the status question produce results that fluctuate "between U.S. citizen and Puerto Rican national

identifications, without being tied down to either pole" (6). In short, the outcome of the 1998 referendum represents another act of resistance on the part of the Puerto Rican people, who have consistently challenged "classical narratives of self and nation implied by all the traditional status choices" (10).

The same could be said for the poetry of the four writers discussed in this project; the implications embedded in "none of the above" resonate for me as a way of thinking about the verses of Burgos, Soto Vélez, Espada, and Ayala, which do not fit neatly into any one box or category but instead challenge readers to approach their work from new and different angles. Perhaps most compelling is Negrón-Mutaner's point that *ninguna de las anteriores* more accurately translates as "none of the preceeding"; in this case, she argues that *ninguna de las anteriores* "consigns the options of statehood, independence, and colonialism to the past and so expresses both doubt and hope in the future" (6). In a similar vein, the poems I examine in this project repeatedly critique and complicate simplistic narratives of the Puerto Rican experience, and in many instances, they also posit innovative ways of thinking about notions of self, citizenship, and community. Burgos' declaration of herself as an activist, Soto Vélez's vision for a classless society, Espada's emphasis on the power of words to build community, and Ayala's insistence on memory as central to the formation of identity illustrate some of the ways in which these poets imagine alternative ways of being. By employing a variety of techniques, Burgos, Soto Vélez, Espada, and Ayala each craft a poetry of resistance that denounces oppression, advocates for social justice, re-envisions history, and offers new possibilities for self-determination.

Resistance has been and continues to be an integral part of both Puerto Rican history and its cultural production. Although this resistance is rooted in a long-standing anti-colonial battle for independence (now spanning more than five hundred years), it extends beyond the nationalist movement and encompasses a wide range of humanistic struggles, including the global subjugation of the working class, poverty, labor conditions, gender inequality, the control of female sexuality, environmental destruction, access to education, and cultural and linguistic discrimination. The Puerto Rican people have always understood their struggle as part of a larger struggle against empire, to which the poets discussed here frequently draw attention in their verses. In this way, their poetry participates in a transnational dialogue at the same time that it partakes in cultural decolonization.

A key feature of decolonization entails the overthrowing of colonial ideologies implanted within the native culture as well as deconstructing the colonial view of the "other." In the case of Puerto Rico, this has meant the ongoing destabilization of the perspective of Puerto Ricans as submissive and incapable of self-governance. More recently and in relation to literary scholarship, this means challenging the static perception of and approaches to Puerto Rican literature. Although the Nuyorican movement garnered a position for Puerto Rican writers within American literature, an unfortunate consequence of this visibility has been the pigeonholing of Puerto Rican authors, and more specifically poets, as "Nuyorican" writers. While ninety percent of Puerto Ricans in the United States lived in New York City in 1940 (Rodriguez, et al 2),

by 2008, only thirty percent did[23] (Collazo, Ryan, and Bauman 7); for many contemporary Puerto Rican poets, then, the barrios of New York City are not solely representative of their diasporic experiences (Marquez), and their writing moves away from the Nuyorican style that dominated U.S. Puerto Rican poetry up through the 1980s.

This project participates in the critical conversation by identifying resistance as a defining characteristic of Puerto Rican poetry that transcends generation, geographic location, and aesthetic movement, thereby linking Puerto Rican poets across time and space. While the scope of this study only allowed for an examination of tropes of resistance in the work of four writers, the verses of several other Puerto Rican poets, such as Juan Antonio Corretjer, Luis Palés Matos, Sandra Maria Esteves, and Aracelis Girmay, demonstrate a poetics of resistance; their work also merits additional study. As literary scholar Roberto Marquez notes, Puerto Rican poets continually unsettle boundaries and their texts challenge traditional literary categories like "American literature" and "Puerto Rican poetry"; while this may pose difficulty in terms of classification, this poetry demonstrates the complex position of both the individual and the nation in an increasingly transnational world.

With the exception of Martín Espada, whose work has gained attention among Latino/a studies scholars over the past several years, all of the poets discussed here remain largely unknown among the American public and understudied in the academy. Although Julia de Burgos is renowned among Puerto Ricans for her lyrical poetry that takes up themes of love, identity, and death, her political poems, which demonstrate a poetics of resistance, have earned little critical attention. As my discussion of her poems

[23] While the Puerto Rican population in the New York metropolitan area has remained close to 1.2 million since 1990, between 1990 and 2008, it tripled in Florida and grew by one million across the rest of the country (Collazo, Ryan, and Bauman 7).

show, many of her verses function as a direct call to insurrection, such as "Ours is the Hour," and "Ibero-America Resurges before Bolívar," while others, like "Puerto Rico Is In You" and "Holy Hour," critique the colonial system in place and demonstrate its negative effects on the community. In addition, many of her poems, most notably "23rd of September," contribute to Puerto Rico's cultural decolonization by commemorating important sociopolitical figures, like Pedro Albizu Campos, and by re-envisioning significant historical events. Through her use of repetition, personification, and at times, a discourse of war, Burgos writes both within and against traditional poetic forms to fashion her critique of social, political, and economic systems of injustice.

Like Burgos, Clemente Soto Vélez actively participated in the Nationalist Party during one of Puerto Rico's most active liberation periods. As a dedicated political activist and philosopher, he engages sociopolitical issues more abstractly than the other three poets under discussion, often approaching them from a metaphysical perspective. By analyzing his use of specific poetic techniques, such as anaphora and juxtaposition, I show that his poetry operates as a highly dialectical process that repeatedly expresses a transcendent vision of liberation. Like Burgos, as well as a host of other Latin American poets who preceded him, Soto Vélez understood the parallels between Puerto Rico's liberation movement and the global struggle against empire, and his verses reflect a desire for social and economic equality across national, cultural, religious, and ideological lines. For Soto Vélez, true sovereignty not only entails political independence, but also emancipation from intellectual oppression, and he repeatedly proclaims that the word, or the "guerilla tongue," is as effective as a gun in fighting against subjugation and injustice. In fact, for this poet, knowledge represents one of the

most powerful tools of resistance. Soto Vélez worked alongside social and political movements throughout his life, and he not only espoused but also demonstrated the importance, indeed the necessity, of poet warriors in the struggle for both liberation and decolonization.

Martín Espada, who witnessed Soto Vélez's spirit of defiance first-hand, adds to his and Burgos' poetics of resistance in his politically defiant verses. My examination of Espada's work reveals his skill with imagery, and his nuanced portrayals of immigrants and the working class illustrate the far-reaching effects of colonialism and empire into the twenty-first-century. I contend that he creates resistance within his lines by positioning "outsiders" as the focus of his poems; in so doing, he documents their hardships and denounces the injustices committed against them, but what he truly emphasizes is their steadfast resilience. Espada's engagement with history is one of the key features of his poetry; his poems challenge "official" histories, such as the massacre at Turners Falls in the "The River Will Not Testify," and construct alternative narratives, thereby embodying the spirit of resistance he catalogues. Like Soto Vélez, Espada believes in the power of poetry to resist oppression and to create change in society.

Naomi Ayala's professional and artistic work centers on effecting change. As a young adult, she soon realized the connections between art and social activism as well as the ways in which they can enrich one another; she continues to dedicate her life to challenging discrimination and demonstrating the empowering potential of art. Since she spent her formative years on the island, much of her early poetry explicitly addresses the United States' overpowering presence in Puerto Rico and the long-lasting effects of colonialism upon the Puerto Rican landscape and psyche. Like the previous three poets,

she utilizes repetition and allusion to highlight and denounce injustices of all kind; however, her use of code-switching, nature imagery, and unconventional grammar distinguishes her verses from theirs and enables her to express a multifaceted female identity strongly connected with the earth. Perhaps more than the other writers, several of Ayala's poems, like "Amber Hands" and "Cada Vez," underscore the significance of both personal and collective memory as a tool for social justice and cultural survival. My analyses of her "words of defiance," "poetics of history and memory," and "songs of female identity" trace the development of her feminist discourse of resistance, a rhetoric that illustrates the intricacies of the Puerto Rican experience on both the island and the mainland, works to overcome ideological and cultural colonialism, and exemplifies a transnational humanism.

As the work of Burgos, Soto Vélez, Espada, and Ayala show, Puerto Rican poets perpetuate a legacy of resistance that reflects an ongoing quest for self-determination. This project illustrates that Puerto Rican poets reflect a broad range of literary influences by writing both in and across traditional poetic genres and their work continues to expand the literary scope of the Puerto Rican experience. At the end of poem #17 from *The Promised Land*, Soto Vélez proclaims a yearning for a more egalitarian society: "worker / eternity / lives / in your hands / in those hands / lives / liberation" (211-217). All four of the poets discussed here echo this sentiment throughout their verses and utilize their poetry as a powerful tool to promote this vision. By defying assimilation and cultural erasure, offering alternative perspectives of history, and articulating innovative notions of identity and community, Burgos, Soto Vélez, Espada, and Ayala not only advocate for but also enact resistance through their art.

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